

A TV Show Host's Performance: An Exploratory Study

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Abstract

An exploratory case study of a TV show host was conducted. The aim was to gain an understanding of the nature of her performance, the mental demands that it placed on her, and the methods she had of coping with these demands. The show host and a close colleague of several years were interviewed to obtain relevant information. The show host's recording day was also observed to provide further understanding, and media clips were used as a source of supplementary information. Results were divided into the following areas: the nature of the performance, performance quality, having a high profile, weekly routines and actual performance.

Background and purpose

The researcher was interested in carrying out an exploratory study of a performer in a field other than sport. A well-known television performer was chosen in order to find out more about what was required of performers in the media. This is a very competitive occupation which places great demands on its performers both in their professional and private lives. What can be learned from the experiences of athletes and applied to TV performers? And vice versa, what can performers in other fields learn from them?

The purpose of this study, therefore, was to gain an understanding of the nature of a TV show host's performance, the mental demands which it placed on her, and the methods she had of coping with these demands.

Methodology

A naturalistic approach to research was used to carry out this study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This form of qualitative inquiry was chosen as it helps to build a holistic picture of the issues to

be studied. It also acknowledges the effect of the researcher on the study.

Procedure

The TV personality selected was an experienced and successful Swedish TV and radio performer. As such, it was assumed that she would have had experience with the trials and tribulations of TV performance. At the time of the study, she was recording a show on a regular basis, which meant it was possible for the researcher to observe her performance.

The selected show host was contacted via a mutual friend who told her a little about the researcher and the study that she wished to carry out. The researcher then contacted the show host by telephone to discuss the study in further detail, and to obtain her commitment to the study. This telephone discussion also functioned as a further means of familiarising the study participant with the researcher.

An initial two hour-long interview was conducted at the show host's home. The next step in the process was a

daylong observation of the show host's recording day at the television studio. The following day, the researcher rang the participant and asked questions about her observations during the recording day. An interview with a colleague who had worked closely with the show host for several years was carried out several weeks later. Finally, a collection of media clippings about the show host was read in an attempt to find further relevant information and/or confirmation of information which had already been obtained.

Interview Protocol

The researcher aimed to create an open and relaxed conversational atmosphere in which the respondent felt able to speak freely. It is important to note here that the show host requested the researcher to disguise personal details about her in order to preserve her anonymity. This has been done in such a manner as to respect the show host's request at the same time as producing a case study which does not distort information about her performance. Confidentiality was an important aspect of creating an open atmosphere for the interviews.

An open-ended interview format was used in this study. The researcher had a picture of basic areas to address if the interview participant did not cover them. These areas included the build up to performance, mental attitude/routines on performance days, the consequences of being a public figure, the nature of performance and recovery. A detailed pre-determined list of questions, which would have dictated the direction of the interview and the information gathered, was avoided. Questions came up as a natural part of the flow of the dialogue.

The interviews lasted approximately two hours. Permission was given to record the interviews in order to be able to create accurate transcripts.

Data analysis

The recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim. The transcripts were then read several times by the researcher in order to gain a better understanding of the show host. All gathered information was broken down into relevant themes, put together to form a picture of the show host, and used subsequently to write the case

Establishing trustworthiness

There are four main issues, according to Hanson and Newburg (1992), to be approached when establishing the trustworthiness of a naturalistic study: credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability.

Credibility has been established in this case study by using the following methods:

1. Peer debriefing: this study has been discussed with a disinterested peer who has experience of similar qualitative case studies. Discussions involved the exploration of the researcher's biases and her interpretations of data.
2. Member checking: the study participant reviewed the interview transcripts and discussed conclusions from the interviews, observations, and media clips with the researcher. The final version of the case study was also checked and

approved by the study participant.

3. Triangulation by source: this involved obtaining different sources of information in order to check findings. This was achieved by first interviewing the show host, then by observing her recording day when she is under most pressure. Finally, a colleague of the show host was interviewed and media clips about the show host were read.

Dependability and confirmability have been established via an inquiry audit (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In this study, tutor approval of the description of methods of information gathering and building the case study has formed one part of such an audit. Another part was the auditing of the process and results which was carried out by a peer who was not involved in the case study.

Transferability refers to the ability and extent to which the findings from this case study can be transferred to other situations. In naturalistic inquiry, the aim is to provide the reader with sufficiently rich and detailed information so that she or he may decide whether the information presented in this case is applicable to the reader's situation. In this case study, it has been the intention of the researcher to provide a "thick description" (Hanson & Newburg, 1992) which will help the reader to decide about transferability.

Person as an instrument statement

The researcher is currently a part-time student of sports psychology as well as studying business administration and

economics. She has completed a major thesis using qualitative methods as a part of her business degree.

She has performance experience in high-level sport, as well as in dance, modelling and advertising. As these fields share some similar demands with those of hosting a television show, she was able to use insights gained from experience to help in understanding the current context.

The researcher entered the study assuming that there are parallels which exist between sport and TV performances. She also assumed that not much was being done by television performers to consciously use mental training to help themselves to perform or simply to help their own personal development. Moreover, the researcher assumed that the field of television performance could benefit from the knowledge available in the area of sport psychology.

The case study: A TV show host and her performance

Show host's biography

The show host was born in the 1960s and raised in Sweden. As a child, she was interested in radio, becoming an avid radio listener when her parents rationed TV viewing at home. During her high school years, she took an active interest in producing radio. At university, she worked on the university magazine and at the radio station. During this period, the show host's family, who were somewhat conservative, had expectations that after completing her university degree, she would build a successful career in a traditional manner. These expectations created some inner conflict for the show host when she decided to

follow her interests and began to work in the media profession.

A job at a magazine led to some timely contacts with media figures and a project in radio. Simply by following what she enjoyed doing, she became part of an extremely successful radio program. This success led to other media opportunities. A TV program, based on an unusual idea, was the next success for the show host. By this time, the show host was beginning to be in demand in the media world, and was consequently offered the possibility of hosting a show based on a well-known American formula, for an even larger Swedish TV channel than she was working for before. There was a lot of external pressure placed on the now well-known host to produce the “goods” just as she had done before. As it turned out, the first season was less of a success than first expected. In response to this, the content of the show was adjusted slightly during the summer break. It was in this context - during the show’s second season - that this study was conducted.

The nature of the performance

It’s a performance making this program even if we can always re-film or edit it if we need to. In this show, it’s basically one take. There are about 180 people sitting and watching in the studio and there are a lot of people working behind the scenes. It’s not like I can suddenly say, ‘I don’t feel like doing this right now, I’m off home. Can we do it tomorrow?’.

When the season is in progress, the show host must perform once a week in front of the cameras come rain or come shine. There was a safety margin to be found in the possibility to edit in-

terviews with guests or to re-film, but the immediate pressure to perform in the heat of the lights still remained.

A lot of energy is required simply to keep track of the details involved in being the show host. There are many things which I need to remember - movements, things to say, cameras to look at. I need to think about what I have to do next and what questions I have to ask. My producer is amazed that we never have to interrupt recording because I have said something wrong. I always say my lines right. I am good at that.

One of the show host’s strengths was the ability to concentrate on and remember the many details that led to a smooth and professional performance. She said that her academic background has been a factor which contributed to this ability.

On TV, I need to come over as more professional, sharper, faster and funnier in order to be entertaining. I have created a more well-defined TV character of myself which is quite dry and rational, but funny. It’s an unusual combination which has given me my own niche.

Part of a TV performance involves creating an explicit character which is entertaining and unusual. The host was not really the same person on TV as she is outside the studio.

I have full control over my input and what I have to prepare. I don’t get help with that. I know what it is that I have to do and what I need to prepare. I must emphasize though that I am simply

a part of the machinery. The whole time I have a team backing me up and taking care of most things for me. I am the one who has the good fortune to be seen the whole time and get all the praise when things go well, but also the criticism when things go badly.

Comments from others in the team and observations bear witness to the statement that she saw herself as one person in a team. They spoke of her humility and good attitude towards others in the team. She seemed, however, to forget the rest of the team when media critics wrote bad reviews about the show, and tended to take the full burden on her own shoulders rather than spreading it across the team.

My work affects other aspects of my life quite substantially at the moment. Even though I have the luxury of having long periods when I am on holiday, I feel that when I work I put a lot of time and energy into what I am doing. It is a very uneven workload. It is physically demanding due to the time and concentration required to do the job. I know that every Friday I have to interview a couple of guests. I unconsciously think of these guests day and night in order to prepare myself.

I feel that my relationship with my boyfriend suffers as a result of my work. We record one program a week and this makes me feel that I don't have enough time to do anything else. When I have spare time, I want to spend it with my boyfriend, and consequently feel bad because I don't see my other friends.

She had difficulties prioritizing her free time; she felt that she needed to put more time and energy into her work. This may

have been partially caused by the fact that the program had not been as well-received as hoped, therefore causing the show host to analyse her performance and to think "overtime" of ways to improve the program as a whole. The risk is that this may also have contributed to the creation of a vicious circle - she has less free time, feels unhappy about that, does not perform well and so on. The fact that this had been a step up to a larger TV station and a new program had raised the stakes.

Performance quality

The first two successful programs that the show host was a part of were built on rather unusual ideas which she and several others came up with. They simply created what they themselves felt was fun and interesting rather than trying to find what the public wanted. The show host worked on them because she felt that it was enjoyable. The feeling of surprise about the success of the first two ventures plus not really knowing what she had done to be successful led to difficulties with her latest venture when things did not go so well.

Viewer ratings and critic reviews are forms of external feedback about quality of performance. There were very great expectations placed on this show when it began. The media and critics observed and discussed practically every program and were not generous with their praise. Nor were viewers as numerous as expected.

The show host spoke of feelings of frustration when she and her producer felt that they had a good show, but external feedback said the opposite. She felt that it was very important for her to feel that she had a good program even if

others did not share her opinion. This did not, however, make it easier to cope with the negative feedback which she had been receiving.

The link between external feedback and myself as an individual is very strong. I feel bad when things are going bad. When reviews say that my program is no good, it is me that is no good. I think that this is not only a result of bad self-confidence; I mean it's logical to put the two together. I am affected by this even though I am pleased with what I am doing. I find it very difficult to differentiate between me, the show host, and me, the regular person.

A major problem since starting this new program was the stress caused by negative feedback about her performance. Her self worth as a whole had been affected. She had found it difficult to distinguish between the private individual and the show host, even though she knew that the quality of her performance should not be confused with who she is. It had affected her self-confidence and disturbed her feeling of well-being.

Perhaps one of the keys to performing really well is feeling harmonious and feeling good in the studio when we are recording. It is then that I can be spontaneous and warm, and come up with good questions to guests or make funny comments.

The show host found it difficult to determine precisely which factors contributed to a good performance on her part. She said that she couldn't determine when she steps into the studio whether or not the program she is about to record will be what she calls a "good program". She may feel physically ill or

unprepared to meet her guest, yet still produce a good performance. This she found worrying. She did admit though that there was a greater chance of performing well if she was well prepared, well rested, harmonious and had already met her guests.

I learned voice and breathing exercises from a speech therapist which help in my preparation for recording and to combat stress. I feel that these have been a great help, but I don't always use them in my preparation unfortunately. I have also found that it is important for me to have plenty of sleep in order to be fresh. Physical training has also been a way for me to get stronger physically in order to cope with the pressure from work and has been a means to clear my head.

She had at her disposal tools which she felt were good for her well-being and performance, but did not use them on a regular basis. She was aware of storing stress in her body in different ways such as severe tension headaches, neck and shoulder tension, and the occasional stomach problem. These physical problems have come more often than not when there have been bad reviews or bad viewer ratings.

Having a high profile

When you see me on TV I am playing a role. When I go home from the studio, people on the bus point at me or when I go out to a restaurant, they want to talk to me about the program or something. All these things, this attention and focus on me tend to wear me out because I can't just get rid of it. There are days when I don't feel so strong, on such days I travel by taxi instead of by bus and I stay at home with

my boyfriend instead of going out, or I choose to do something that everybody else isn't doing.

Even if attention was often positive, it was still tiring. It was even more so if it was negative. Moreover, it was not possible to flick a switch and get rid of public attention. As was mentioned above, the distinction between being a private person and a professional becomes hazy - work performance affects the individual "behind" the show host. She spoke of feeling strong some days and weak on others when she did not want to cope with public pressure.

Pressure on the show host to perform had on the whole increased with the new program and with increasing fame. She applied greater pressure on herself which affected her general well-being. The external pressure in the form of media attention and focus on her show and performance had also increased during the past year.

I do feel that it is extremely wearing and tiring to have my own program, where I am the one who is visible and gets all the attention. I have enjoyed it though during the years when things went so well. But when I get bad reviews or low viewer ratings it doesn't really matter if I think that I have done a good job. It affects me no matter what. These thoughts go through my head when I make my entrance into the studio and my audience applauds - I must perform.

There was a tendency for her to take criticism personally when things were going badly even though she was aware that she was part of a team effort and even if she felt that she had done a good job. She expended a considerable

amount of energy worrying about what others in the media and public said about her program and her performance.

I find it difficult talking to friends about this. They can't really understand my situation because they haven't had anywhere near the same experiences. I can talk to my boyfriend, he has some good thoughts, but he is still too much in the thick of things. I need someone to talk to about everything.

Not being able to discuss the issues which are involved in having such a high profile with someone who can listen and have some understanding of her situation made it difficult for the show host to gain the neutral support that she needed. She lacked a coach who usually fills such a role for athletes.

Weekly routines

I am a very rational and logical person. I try to set up a pattern for how my week looks and stick to it so that every week has the same appearance. I see the build-up to recording days as a weekly unit. I have Mondays off and the week really begins on Tuesdays. There is a slow but sure build-up of energy which is directed towards that hour on Fridays. The energy is more a matter of being prepared, feeling safe and secure in myself. I know my stuff so well and I know exactly what I am going to do. I have read up about my guests and can put everything aside and simply be curious. I do have a script with me because I do get nervous when I'm sitting there.

The show host and other sources constantly emphasized how rational she was and how she wanted control. She said that this need for control was both good and bad. Good, because it enabled

her to plan her work in the manner that suited her and gave her a feeling of security as a result. Structuring her work and time in the way that she did was also a means of controlling stress. The structure also contributed to her professionalism and reliability. The need for control was bad in that she felt that it made her too rigid and decreased the possibility to be creative and spontaneous.

Tuesdays and Wednesdays were quite relaxed days for the show host. They marked the beginning of the mental processes which built up to performance on Fridays. There was little feeling of pressure, and time was not quite as precious as it was later in the week. It was the lower rung of the ladder of stress where Friday was the top rung. The show host spoke of enjoying Fridays and that they felt good because everything became so much more concrete.

Tuesdays involved a variety of tasks such as: team evaluation of the previous program, brainstorming of ideas for the program on Friday, and preparing background material about guests for the show host to read. The show host may have also booked a meeting with a guest as part of her preparation.

Wednesdays were occupied by recording of segments which were later slotted into the Friday program. The show host saw Wednesdays as being rather relaxed, pleasant days, because she just had to go where she was told and follow orders.

Thursday is the day before recording. It is really first on Thursdays that the program is beginning to take shape in our heads. In some ways it feels good

because it's soon my time to perform. At the same time, however, I am more difficult to deal with. I don't usually want to meet my boyfriend on Thursdays and I am more easily irritated or angry because there is no longer room for mistakes. On Tuesdays we can play around and waste a bit of time, but by Thursday it's important that things work. I leave the office at Thursday lunchtime and spend the afternoon working at home. Being at home allows me to increase my feeling of control of the situation. I can turn off the phone so that no one can disturb me. I sometimes have a sleep in the middle of the afternoon and then continue working after that. I see this as a simple concentration exercise which gives me a little breathing space and peace of mind. Thursday afternoon is important for my focus and build-up to recording the following day. I use this time to start physically concentrating on the program. I write out a program of how the recording day is going to look in detailed point form. Some aspects are very long as they include questions to guests or comments I'll make at certain times.

The feeling of stress was building up by Thursday and the show host was aware that she tended to express this stress with people around her. Her Thursday afternoon strategy was an important one, because it helped to build up her concentration, focus and feeling of control of the situation. It was also a means of getting rid of external sources of distraction. Other sources consulted bear witness to the fact that she was at times easily distracted and could get carried away with irrelevant matters.

Performance time

There is a clear pattern for how Fridays work. I don't have to be at the studio until mid-morning which is great as it gives me the time to start the day in a positive, relaxed manner. Otherwise, it's usually quite a busy, stressful day when people in the team are occupied with their tasks.

Once again the idea of structure and predictability appears in order to create a feel of control of the situation. The show host had found, by experience, the recipe for a harmonious start to recording days. She had a genuinely positive approach to Fridays and appeared to enjoy them even if she felt a little nervousness.

There seemed to be few spaces during the day once she arrived at the studio. She attempted to get into the calm of her dressing room in order to read her script and to focus herself several hours before recording. This was not always successful though, due to the many activities which were sandwiched into the hours prior to program start. Vocal chord warm-up was on the "To Do" list, but that was not always managed.

I feel that most of my energy goes towards looking cool and calm on the outside in front of everybody else.

Despite her calm surface, the show host became more stressed as performance time came closer and closer. An increase in the speed and amount of physical movement during the day was noticeable. She also admitted to using physical movement to increase her arousal level. On top of this, she hummed away or talked to herself out

loud to pep herself up more frequently as recording time drew nearer.

There are times when I perform that I feel that I am not totally harmonious or in control. I feel slightly stressed or unfocused; I am not really listening to what my guest is saying. Perhaps I feel nervous sitting there in the spotlight or maybe I might say to myself when I am sitting there, 'This is no good. I have got to do something about this. What shall I do?' What usually happens is that if the show starts well, it just gets better and better. If, however, I have a guest who is not on the same wavelength as me, things can get a bit stiff and forced. That affects me negatively for the rest of the program.

The few times when she became unfocused could affect the rest of her performance. It must be said that in general, once the show host sat in front of the camera, she was extremely focused on the task at hand and was a very good performer.

There are many times when I have felt physically and mentally exhausted a whole weekend after performance.

She did not, however, have any physical or mental routines to review her performance or to aid recovery. Nor did she have any specific plans for what happened after recording.

It's not always easy to steer what happens, like if there's a party on or someone wants to go out. If things went well, I want to go out and have fun. If things went badly, I can feel pretty annoyed or negative. These are two sides

of the same coin, but the energy can go in two different directions.

Her activities after the show were influenced by how she felt the show went. Her own feeling during recording plus the producer's opinion dictated whether or not she felt things went well. There were times when she felt that it was a good program, but her producer thought that it was not. She admitted to being influenced by his opinion and that her opinion had often changed according to what he said. This in turn affected activities after recording.

Summary

The show host followed her interest in the media. She began a successful career first in radio and then TV after completing her academic studies. Her latest venture, hosting a program on a large Swedish TV channel, has proven to be a challenge, as it has not been immediately received as well as expected.

Her performance involved creating an interesting character who hosts a TV program. She had to pull together a lot of details in an entertaining manner, in front of a studio audience and a large technical team. Even though she is part of a team who works on the program, she is the most visible team member who tended to take the brunt of both the praise and the criticism for the show. Preparation for the show took up a lot of her time and energy during the season which has meant that she had difficulties prioritizing other aspects of her life other than her work. This affected her private life considerably.

The feedback she received as to the quality of her performance came in the form of viewer ratings and critics'

reviews. She has felt satisfied with her program and her performance, but has received quite negative external feedback during the first two seasons. This has led to decreased feelings of self-worth and has negatively affected her well-being in general. She had at her disposal several tools to improve physical well-being, but did not always use them.

It was tiring being a person with a high profile; it was not possible to flick a switch and get rid of public attention. She felt that she had no one who understood her situation.

She structured her week in an orderly manner in order to increase her feelings of control of the situation and to decrease stress. Through experience, she had, to a certain extent, created routines which work for her.

When it came to actual performance, she was good at focusing on what she was doing and performing in a professional and successful manner. She worked hard at appearing cool and calm in the hours close to recording, even if she felt nervous inside. There were many times during the past year when she has been physically and mentally exhausted the whole weekend after recording.

Discussion and conclusions

The researcher believes that many of the issues faced by the TV host are also experienced by athletes, even though the nature of actual performance is different. Perhaps one of the differences between a TV performance and a sports performance is that in the case of the former, it is more difficult to obtain objective feedback about performance quality. This can lead to a psychological

problem for the performer if she herself believes that she is performing well, but external feedback says otherwise.

The nature of the profession also provides performance challenges. Television is very trend conscious, and follows what is happening in other media and society at large quite closely. Seeking outward approval and wanting to be hip or trendy could create problems for a performer such as the show host in this study. Her self-worth and well-being become linked to being “right” in other people’s eyes. Superficial characteristics become more important than the core of the person.

In sport, it is pretty much unthinkable for an athlete or a team not to

have a coach. Some similar form of external support in the form of a mental coach for a TV performer would also be valuable. This person could provide a listening ear and be able to help the performer with mental training which would then provide her with skills to perform better professionally, and as a bonus, aid her self-development. Even without such a coach, a more explicit focus on the mental side of performance would be a great help to TV performers.

The show host requested that the researcher complete this paper with a note saying that she and others felt that since this study was conducted, her television show had flowed better and that she as a host gave a better performance.

References

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