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THE RISE OF 'TRASH' TALK SHOWS

by

Saida Abdi, B.A

A thesis submitted to
The Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research

in partial fulfillment of
The requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

School of Journalism and Communication

Carleton University
Ottawa, Ontario
February, 2000

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The Rise of 'Trash' Talk Shows

Submitted by Saida Abdi, B.A

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

Thesis Supervisor

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February, 2000

ABSTRACT

This thesis project examines the rise of what is referred to as trash talk shows. It looks at how changes in the U.S telecommunications industry contributed to the proliferation of these types of programs, due to their lower production costs.

The author argues that, while the rise of trash talk shows can be traced back to the economic imperatives which drive American business practices, talk shows should also be looked at as cultural texts which reflect a certain world view. She uses Robin Patric Clair's conceptualization of the use of framing devices to sequester organizational narratives involving sexual harassment in order to argue that talk shows frame the narratives or stories they present in a way which limits their importance in the sphere of public discourse. Specifically, she uses four framing devices: trivialization, denotative hesitancy, public/private dichotomy and normalization/reification to demonstrate how talk shows frame the narratives they present.

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INTRODUCTION

On 24 January, 1996, at the annual syndication¹ meeting in Las Vegas, CNN reported that the end of 'trash' television was in sight. Talk show host Geraldo Rivera vowed to clean up his show and the Jenny Jones program was cancelled by TV stations in California where the content of her show was deemed offensive. The beginning of a new type of daytime talk show was heralded by comedian Rosie O'Donnell, who proclaimed her new show to be more like "Johny Carson" than "Geraldo".

The debate which was taking place in this syndication meeting had been precipitated by meetings held three months prior. On the weekend of October 28th, 1995, a 'Talk Show Summit' was held in New York. Politicians, talk show hosts, producers and community activists participated in the discussion, which was organized by a group called *Empower America*, with the support of Senators Sam Nunn (D-Ga.) and Joseph Lieberman (D-Conn.) and former Reagan-administration Education Secretary William Bennett. This 'concerned' group of citizens claimed that talk shows were

¹ Syndication is the practice of selling programs on 'station by station basis rather than through a network' (Eastman and Ferguson, P.432). Syndication meetings are annual events where syndicators showcase their shows for station managers.

"America's true heart of darkness." They dedicated themselves to the elimination of this "cultural rot." They called for all Americans, especially those in the television industry, to stop the deterioration of American morality by getting rid of 'trash' talk shows. Senator Lieberman warned of the dangers represented by talk shows which, according to him, "increasingly make the abnormal normal, and set up the most perverse role models for our children and adults." (Gamson, 1998:9) Bennett challenged the television industry to show responsibility by canceling 'trash' talk shows. "This is a test of whether there is a sense of shame in the broadcast industry," he warned.

CNN carried a day-long discussion of this meeting on October 30th, 1995. From the early morning news, to *CNN & Company*, to *Talk Back Live* and *Larry King Live*, guests argued about the merits and dangers of having television talk shows. The guests included Secretary of Health and Human Services, Donna Shalala, who was the key note speaker at the Summit, talk shows hosts Gabrielle Carteris and Danny Bonaduce, psychologist Jeanne Heaton, and family values advocate Cathy Cleaver (representing the conservative think tank, the *Family Research Council*).

Why this panic about talk shows? According to one participant, it is because talk shows render the obscene

and abnormal normal. "There is a swelling sense in America that our entertainment culture has become a threat to the well being of our children and the moral health of our **society**," (emphasis in the original) wrote Senator Lieberman in an editorial in the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*. (1995:3p)

The *Empower America* founders felt that what was needed was moral leadership. A "civilization needs cultural guardrails, certain reliable standards of right and wrong that may not be enforceable in law but must be enforceable through conscience and consensus," wrote William Bennett in a piece for the *Los Angeles Times* (1996:9) *Empower America* and its supporters appointed themselves as those guardrails.

The ongoing debate about the effects of talk shows on society, as well as the fact that talk shows are now a major part of television programming, point to a need to seriously examine the place of talk shows in our society. "Like the news, the talk show has become an everyday political instrument as well as advice-giver, ersatz community, entertainer, and promoter," Wayne Munson writes (1993:3). Yet, as he continues,

'{h}igh' critics or academicians and even 'middle ground' media such as the news weeklies have condemned the talk phenomenon, calling it everything from 'trash TV' to deceptive, 'Para-social' pseudo companions (1993:10-11).

This is partially due to the high culture/low culture dichotomy that guides our approach to different cultural products, but more importantly, I think, it is due to the fact that the talk show genre is viewed as a 'woman's' genre. Walters writes, "melodrama and 'women's films' or 'weepies' as they are often called have historically been seen as the 'lowest' form of mass culture, not worthy of the critical attention paid male genres such as Western or film noir"(1995:79). Rapping argues this is because "(m)ale tastes have dictated which TV shows and films are most discussed and honored"(1994:12). Talk shows are considered part of this 'lowest' form of culture which elicits only contempt from 'serious' social critics.

In his book, *Watching Race: Television and the Struggle for "Blackness"*, Herman Gray argues that we should closely and critically examine popular culture because "{c}ommercial culture is increasingly the central place where various memories, myths, histories, traditions, and practices circulate"(1995:4).

This thesis will argue that talk shows represent the kind of "commercial culture" which needs to be examined. This project will focus on talk shows because even the most 'outrageous', 'nonsensical', 'trashy' cultural product

enforces, challenges and embodies our beliefs, attitudes and values. The 'lowest' of cultural texts can serve as a powerful tool for reinforcing hegemonic values in the most 'natural' ways. The 'trashiness' of talk shows appears so obvious, so self-evident that there is no outcry for freedom of speech, freedom of the press, or a first amendment violation when politicians, clergy and businessmen call for a boycott of stations that run talk shows.

Many researchers analyze talk shows as either a negative exploitation of the marginalized and the 'grotesque' or as a positive exposure of the hidden and the beginning of an "oppositional public sphere" (Fraser, 1990). This research will not look at talk shows as negative\positive texts but rather as 'discursive spaces' in which identities are constructed and contested. Specifically, this thesis project will examine:

- (1) how changes in the television industry contributed to the growth of talk shows;
- (2) the use of 'framing' devices on 'trash talk' narratives;

The first chapter of this thesis focuses on the history of talk shows and the factors that have contributed to their origin and development. It also examines the

changes that have taken place over time in talk show format and content. Chapter two reviews the existing literature, including both academic theorization and public debate on talk shows. Chapter three presents the theoretical framework, and chapter four presents my application of the theoretical framework to analysis of trash talk show texts.

CHAPTER I

THE RISE OF TALK SHOWS

Many people are confused when they hear the term 'talk show' because it is used to describe at least four different types of television programs. These include: late night talk shows such as *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno* which focus on celebrity interviews and stand-up comedy, daytime celebrity interview shows such as *Rosie O'Donnell*, talk shows such as *The Oprah Winfrey Show* and the so called 'trash television' shows such as *The Jerry Springer Show*.

According to Wayne Munson, the term 'talk' is used to define shows such as *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, *Sally Jessy Raphael*, and the now cancelled *Donahue*. He writes that, when the format was first introduced, "the goal was to give lively, useful information - centered on interpersonal and psychological matters - to women." (1993:8) Many writers (Munson, 1993; Shattuc, 1997; Gamson, 1998) see these shows as the descendants of early audience participation shows, such as *Queen for a Day* and *Stand Up and Be Counted*, which "presaged *Donahue* in its structuring of audience participation, its personal depth, and its political overtones." (Munson, 1993:54) Each episode of *Stand Up and*

Be Counted "dealt with one "average" individual's personal dilemma" (Munson,1993:54). *Queen for a Day* (1956-1962) was even more closely related to the contemporary talk shows. Women were chosen from the audience and invited on to the stage. Each was asked to "state what she needed most and why". The winner, who was given a prize as a reward, was chosen by the audience's applause(Shattuc, 1997:6). This show's concentration on the needs and desires of 'ordinary housewives' and its inclusion of the audience as active participants presaged the topics and techniques of today's talk shows.

The present-day talk shows were heralded by the debut of *Donahue* in 1967. Though talk show content has evolved over the last thirty years, many analysts agree that all talk shows share some characteristics. Jane Shattuc isolates five of these characteristics. First, the shows are issue-oriented. They focus on social and/or personal issue such as drug use, rape, incest, and social identity. Secondly, these shows are built around audience participation. The audience plays a pivotal role in the presentation of the issue and in the 'resolution'. Thirdly, the discussions are mediated by an authority figure, such as a host, an expert or both. Fourthly, these shows target female audiences. The subject matter of these shows is

constructed with the female audience in mind. And, finally, most of these shows do not originate from the major networks but are syndicated by non-network producers (Shattuc, 1997:3).

After the debut of *Donahue*, it took almost twenty years for another talk show to gain a national foothold in the daytime talk show arena. In 1986, *The Oprah Winfrey Show* debuted. It soon replaced *Donahue* as the number-one talk show in the United States. In the following ten years, television was flooded with new entrants. In 1991 alone, *Maury Povich*, *Montel Williams*, *Richard Bey*, *Jerry Springer* and *Jenny Jones* debuted. By 1993, the television market was completely saturated with talk shows.

Ten years ago, Phil Dohanue had the syndicated talk show market to himself...This year is *Donahue's* 25th year on the air, but unlike 10 years ago, he has plenty of company - or, more correctly, competition - on the air today. In fact, there are a total of 16 syndicated daily talk shows this season (McClellan, 1992:22).

The 1992-93 and 1993-94 television seasons saw an even greater explosion of talk shows. In a 1993 article, Monte Williams noted that in "1990 there were 6½ hours of syndicated talk shows between 9 a.m. and noon, compared with 10 1/2 in 1992". He also noted that there were "more

than 30 syndicated talk shows in the 1993-94 line-up" (Williams, 1993:s6).

The explosive growth of talk shows surprised many in the industry. "I never dreamed there would be this many talk shows," said Jim Coppersmith, vice president and general manager of WCVB-TV Boston in 1992. "As somebody once said, 'every man, woman and child in America would not only want, but eventually have, a talk show'" (Freeman, 1993:36).

Many referred to what was happening as "cannibalization", because syndicators and production companies were creating shows that would wait in the wings in case one of their other shows failed. This put a lot of pressure on new shows to succeed fast. It also made stations move very quickly to replace struggling shows. They began to pull shows off their line-up as soon as they exhibited signs of rating weakness.

Not only were new shows constantly in production during the late eighties and early nineties, but more and more television hours were devoted to talk shows. In 1985 there were four hours of talk shows and fourteen hours of soap opera on daytime television; by 1995 there were less than ten hours of soaps and over twenty hours of talk shows (Abt and Mustazza, 1997:5).

"TRASH TELEVISION"

The derogatory term, trash television, has come to define a new type of television program², especially talk shows, which debuted in the early 1990s. Vicki Abt and Leonard Mustazza(1997)refer to these shows as "Toxic Talk". While shows such as *The Oprah Winfrey Show* and *Donahue* traditionally maintained a connection to social issues and social activism, the new shows focused on confrontation between individuals. In a search for higher ratings in a very competitive talk show environment, talk shows became more and more outrageous and sensationalist.

After half a decade of the dominance of four daytime talk shows with general political commitment, talk shows seemingly lost their tie to the public sphere. Scores of new shows aired...Topics moved from personal issues connected to a social injustice to interpersonal conflicts(Shattuc, 1997:137).

Ricki Lake was the show which set the tone for these new shows due to its early success against the older shows.(Shattuc, 1997; Gamson, 1998).

Ricki Lake, which debuted in 1993, "pushed the genre into new territory" (Gamson, 1998:58). *Ricki Lake* producers

² This term is also used to describe other kinds of shows such as tabloid news magazine shows, for example, *Inside Edition* and *Extra*. It is interesting that these shows are syndicated by the same companies who distribute talk shows. As a matter of fact, the term 'trash television' is used to describe a general deterioration of American cultural and social life.

wanted to create a show which could compete with *The Oprah Winfrey Show* and *Donahue*, the two leading shows at the time. They decided to "take the *Donahue* format and age it down to attract 18-to-34-year-olds," according to Ricki Lake executive producer Gail Steinberg (quoted in Gamson, 1998:58). *Ricki Lake* producers introduced some of the markers which are now associated with trash television. Gamson (1998) lists some of these characteristics:

- Trash talk shows focus on personal relationships rather than issues.
- Trash talk shows have 'revved up' studios and increased the number of guests. This reduces the time spent on each guest's personal story and creates a competition for the microphone amongst the guests.
- There is a conscious effort to attract young, urban guests and audiences (this is obvious in *Ricki*, *Springer* and *Jenny Jones* where there is an almost spring-break-like atmosphere).
- There is an "upfront appeal to black audiences". (One *Ricki* executive producer says they believed that, by appealing to urban/black audiences and guests, they would get both these audiences and young white suburban audiences because the black audiences would tune in to

watch other blacks and the white youth would watch because "black=street=hip". (Gamson 1998:59-60)

- The new shows recruit guests by appealing to personal conflicts. While Donahue and *The Oprah Winfrey Show* recruited guests by contacting people who were interested or involved in the issues under discussion, the new shows post an 800 number, asking people to call if they want to appear on the show.

These 800 numbers are an easier way to recruit rather than coming up with an issue and searching for those most informed about it, or discovering a story in a newspaper or a magazine and tracking down its key figures, you just post a topic, see who calls, and build a show around the most interesting, funny, dramatic, good storied, good-storyteller (Gamson, 1998:60).

All these changes create a new kind of talk show with new kind of guests- poor, urban, black/latino. "[B]lack people and latinos became prominent, along with poorer white folks, and the educational level of guests and audience members came down along with their age and economic status" (Gamson, 1998:63).

The new talk shows also had a new kind of subject matter; all that was once taboo was brought into the open. Sex became the selling item, the more sensational the better. They were about "confrontation, emotion, and sexual titillation" (Shattuc, 1997:138)

Vicki Abt and Leonardo Mustazza examined the content of 18 syndicated shows in one week in August, 1995. They found that The *Oprah Winfrey Show* and *Donahue* had a more varied content, with a mix of entertaining and serious topics.

The others are virtually alike in topic, and there is considerable overlapping. Of the 59 topics, four (7%) might be considered serious or socially useful (e.g., assisted suicide, children and domestic violence), 9 (15%) innocuous (e.g., pet stories, high-school reunions), and a whopping 46 (78%) are about sex, behavioral disturbances, and families out of control (Abt and Mustazza, 1997:63).

Ricki Lake, *The Jerry Springer Show*, *Sally Jessy Raphael*, *Jenny Jones*, *Montel Williams*, *Maury Povich*, *Geraldo*, *Charles Perez*, *Rolonda*, and *Richard Bey*, were the shows labeled as trash and singled out by the *Empower America's* boycott campaign for having the most controversial content (Flint and Wharton, 1995:188). "In these shows, indecent exposure is celebrated as a virtue," accused William Bennett (Shattuc, 1997:137). The above list includes almost all the talk shows on the air at the time, with two notable exceptions, *The Oprah Winfrey Show* and *Donahue*.

There are other day-time talk shows which share the broad category but are markedly different from the so-called 'trash' talk shows. As evidenced by the weekly listings, shows like *Rosie O'Donnell* and the now-cancelled

Howie Mandel share more similarities with *The Tonight Show* with *Jay Leno* and the *Late Show* with *David Letterman* than they do with other daytime talk shows.³ These shows focus on celebrity interviews and are a direct result of the backlash against 'trash' television in the mid-1990s.

The *Rosie O'Donnell Show*, especially, owes its content, format, and marketing to the need of the syndicators and advertisers to respond to attacks on talk show content. It was marketed as a show that was different because it did not deal with subjects that were seen as 'taboo and controversial' but focused on celebrity interviews and stand-up comedy.

The *Oprah Winfrey show* is another talk show which has moved away from what is now known as the 'Springer model' and has begun to focus on 'serious' issues and celebrity interviews. In 1995, when talk show content was a hot topic, Oprah Winfrey used her season opener to take the high road and distance herself from the "'trash' being put on the air by her competitors" (Abt and Mustazza, 1997:65). She promised to produce "shows with images of what we would like to be" (Quoted in Shattuc, 1997:154). Her move was a strategic one, because by 1995 advertisers such as *Proctor*

³ The talk show topic listing in the *Boston Globe* on August 18, 1999 demonstrates this difference. *Rosie O'Donnell* show's listing states: "Scheduled: Jenna Elfman; Patricia Neal; Julia Stiles, while *Jerry Springer's* topic for the day is "Male self-mutilation." (p.D8)

& Gamble were pulling their ads out of shows which they deemed too controversial. (Mandese, 1995:1) As well, Winfrey needed to differentiate herself from all the other Winfrey clones who were crowding the airwaves. "What we're really doing is trying to disassociate ourselves from the 'Trash Pack'" she explained in a Boston Herald interview. "There is a whole genre of television talk shows that I am not proud to be a part of and don't appreciate being lumped in with." (Lorando, 1994:6)⁴

Jenny Jones, Sally Jessy Raphael, The Maury Povich Show, Montel Williams, Ricki Lake and The Jerry Springer Shows are the current most popular talk shows that are referred to as 'trash'. In this thesis, the term 'talk show' will be used to refer to a particular type of talk show of which the above are examples.

U.S TELECOMMUNICATION POLICY AND THE RISE OF TALK SHOWS

Robin Andersen in her book, *Consumer Culture and TV Programming* (1995), identifies changes that took place in the US telecommunications environment in the 1980s which,

⁴ The result of Oprah's decision was that she lost ratings. But she is able to command higher fees because her show is more attractive to advertisers. In a poll done by Advertising Age in November, 1995, when participants were asked which shows are worst for advertisers to use "The Jerry Springer Show" and "Ricki Lake" were voted worst, while Oprah was voted best. At the time of this writing, even though The Jerry Springer Show is rated higher than The Oprah Winfrey Show, Oprah's advertising fees are three times those of Springer. (Teasdale, 1999:s7)

she argues, have greatly contributed to the rise of what has come to be known as 'trash television, including talk shows.

The first change discussed by Andersen is a widespread deregulation of the telecommunications industry beginning in the late 1970s and continuing in earnest in the 1980s and 1990s. The second change is what has been called the 'waning power of advertising' which forces producers, broadcasters, and advertisers to seek more effective and innovative ways of holding the interest of an increasingly sophisticated television audience. The third factor is the decline of the power of the three major networks in the 1980s and the growing power of the fourth network (*Fox*) and other smaller networks (*United Paramount Network (UPN)*, and *Warner Bros. (WB)*). The fourth and final change she identifies is the growing power of independent stations and affiliates in their relationship to the major networks. In the following pages, I will consider each of these factors in more detail.

1. DEREGULATION

In the 1980s, the telecommunication industry in the United States experienced what Vincent Mosco describes as

the "commercialization" of broadcasting. According to Mosco, commercialization "takes place when the state replaces forms of regulation based on public interest, public service and related standards such as universality, with market standards that establish market regulations"(1996:202). In 1983, "rules regarding commercial and public affairs content" in television were removed. (Swann, 1988:179) As well, ownership rules were relaxed. The "number of VHF TV stations allowed to a single owner has been increased and the rules relating to broadcast ownership of cable have been relaxed. Franchise periods have been lengthened...many more commercial TV stations have been licensed, particularly independent ones" (Swan, 1988:179).

These changes radically altered television ownership and programming. For example, before these regulatory changes, "the three year-rule" which mandated that "a broadcast entity could not be sold for three years after the date of purchase" protected broadcast companies from speculative take-over until they were strong enough to compete (Andersen, 1995:19). Deregulation opened the door for entrepreneurs interested in making quick money.

Before deregulation, corporate speculators did not purchase stations solely for the purpose of commodity trading. After deregulation, however, speculators who

had no interest or experience in the media bought and sold stations simply to make profit (Andersen, 1995:19).

Eugene Secunda found that in the 1980's, all three networks and many independent stations were bought by "bottom-line-minded entrepreneurs, intent on getting a fast return on their investments" (1989:3). This created a very unstable and fiercely competitive environment which "set a trend for broadcasting that resulted in the devastation of news departments, increasing demands for low-cost programming, and the escalating competition for short-term profits" (Andersen, 1995:19).

The effects on news departments was especially devastating because before "bottom-line management, network economics traditionally protected news producers from budgetary and ratings pressures that now characterize all broadcast news divisions" (Andersen, 1995:20). Also, before the regulatory changes of the 1980's, the 'fairness doctrine' "put pressure on the broadcasters to provide balanced coverage of issues in the public domain" (Mosco, 1996:221). In that period, news departments in the major networks were not seen as profit making ventures, but were subsidized by the entertainment segments of programming. "News divisions were subsidized by entertainment departments as representing the portion of

the broadcasting day designed in the public 'interest, convenience, and necessity'" (Andersen, 1995:19).

With the increased search for profit, and without regulatory supervision, news divisions came under attack from profit seeking executives. Meeting the bottom-line meant producing shows that were cheap and commercially popular. 'Trash' television was one answer to this search for profit. It was part of a general move from high-cost drama, news and comedy to low cost 'reality' shows, which not only cost less but could be tailor-made to target a specific audience segment and sold to advertisers targeting that audience group. The objective was to deliver audiences to advertisers effectively.

2. COMBATTING THE "WANING POWER OF ADVERTISING"

Andersen and other writers also suggest that trash television is the result of an effort by broadcasters to combat the 'waning effect' of advertising. This explanation is derived from Dallas Smythe and Sut Jhally's analyses of audience activities. Using Dallas Smythe's description of audience activities as 'work', Jhally argued that, when broadcasters buy a program and sell advertising time on the program to sponsors, they are really selling the audience's

activities. As Jhally emphasizes, it "is their time that is being bought and sold"(1987:76). By selling audience activities, the broadcaster makes profit through the audiences' work. But broadcasters have found that there is a limit, not only to the commercial time available for sale, but also to the amount of time audiences will watch commercials.

The networks in this situation must adopt new strategies to manipulate the necessary-surplus time ratio. While the networks can no longer make people watch advertising longer in absolute terms, they can make the time of watching advertising more intense- they can make the audience watch harder. This is accomplished by reorganizing both the audience and the watching time(Jhally, 1987:77).

This reorganization can be achieved in two ways: "The first is by reorganizing the watching audience in terms of demographics"(Jhally, 1987:78). Also known as 'narrow casting', it refers to the practice of creating shows which target specific audience groups(for example, women between 18-49). The second way is "through division of time"(1987:78). Broadcasters, in their search for increased profit, can manipulate the number and length of advertising spots in any given program.

Deregulation gave broadcasters free reign to manipulate the scheduling of advertising spots. But the effort to put as many advertisements as possible in a given

program backfired because, Andersen argues, it led to 'commercial clutter'.

Until about fifteen years ago, advertising's persuasive appeal was impressive. Viewers watched advertisements attentively, and research revealed that they remembered a great deal of what they saw. But deregulation allowed more commercials on every broadcast hour. In addition, the standard 30-second commercial gave way to a proliferation of shorter 10- and 15-second spots (Andersen, 1995:20).

Broadcasters, then, were able to sell more advertising time than ever before, but they were reaching a point where the efficacy of the advertisement was being negatively effected.

According to Jhally, there was another option open to broadcasters. They could manipulate the demographics of the audience to optimize advertising's effectiveness. The rise of talk shows, and, especially, trash talk shows can be seen as a direct result of this attempt to reorganize audiences in terms of demographics.

Demographics are an important aspect of television programming because they partially determine the amount of revenue a distributor and/or a broadcaster receive for a commercial spot. The amount of money advertisers are willing to pay for a spot on any given program depends on ratings (the percentage of households tuned to the program), and demographics (what segment of the population is

watching the program). The higher the rating and the more desirable the demographics, the better the fee that the broadcaster can demand for a commercial spot.

All demographics are not created equal. Advertisers and broadcasters use what is called 'key demographics' to determine the amount paid by advertisers. Adult demographics are divided into 18-24, 25-34, 35-49 and 50 -64 age groups for advertising purposes (Shattuc, 1997:61). A program may have a high rating among the 50-64 year-old demographic group, yet, will not bring a high advertising fee for its distributor. On the other hand, a moderate rating in the age group most coveted by advertisers, 18-49 year-olds, means a show will garner high advertising fees. Talk shows attract women in this coveted age group. This makes them attractive to broadcasters because, Marilyn Matelski argues, "despite the fact that a lucrative advertisement revenue can be obtained from appealing to any demographic viewing group, many broadcasting executives still prefer to target most of their programming to 18-49 year-old women" (1991:13).

This preference is explained by two factors. First, research has shown that women in this age group comprise the largest segment of the television viewing public. Second, women still do the major part of household

shopping. Daytime television, especially, targets women because they reach "their highest concentration during the daytime because they still represent the highest percentage of Americans at home then" (Shattuc, 1997:62)⁵.

In order to maximize advertising effectiveness and get the maximum return for advertising dollars, program directors created programs targeting "the most popular demographics for advertisers" (Scott, 1996:223). Talk shows are a prime example of this kind of programming, tailor made for a specific type of audience, namely women ages 18-49. According to Shattuc, women represent 80% of the talk show audience (Shattuc, 1997:8). In its study of audiences, Nielsen has found that the majority of talk show audiences "are women 18-49" (Flint and Wharton, 1995:183).

Talk shows are attractive to advertisers who are seeking to reach large female audiences. *Proctor and Gamble*, for example, was, in the early and mid-1990s, the biggest buyer of advertising spots on talk shows, spending \$28.3 million in 1995, up 53% from the year before. (Mandese, 1995:1&8) A closer look at the advertisers on talk shows reveals that the major advertisers are

⁵ Shattuc writes that in order to produce talk shows that would attract the female viewer, "syndication companies and affiliates airing daytime talk shows consulted focus groups and lifestyle survey research companies. The syndicators probed the female viewer to give feedback to the production company as well as to assure national advertisers as to viewer taste." (1997:63)

targeting female viewers. For example, research done by *Advertising Age* looked at the advertising in a single day (November 16, 1995) on talk shows airing in Chicago. It found that almost all the advertising⁶ on the five major shows, (*The Oprah Winfrey Show*, *Dohahue*, *Ricki Lake*, *Jenny Jones*, and *Sally Jessy Raphael*) were for household items (cleaning products, medicine, utensils, and tools), and women's or children's items (Mandese, 1995:8). Talk shows provide advertisers an opportunity to reach the most desirable group of young people and female viewers aged 18-49 the entire day. Because the daytime soap operas did not usually begin airing before midday, the morning time slot between nine a.m and noon was filled by reruns and game shows.⁷ Putting talk shows in this time slot offered advertisers a cheap alternative to reruns. A 30-second ad on *The Oprah Winfrey Show* costs \$60,000. On *The Jerry Springer Show* it costs \$20,000 and on *Sally Jessy Raphael* \$16,000. (Mandese:1999:s2)

Another attraction for advertisers is that because talk shows attract large female audiences, as do soaps and

⁶ Of course, with the raging controversy over talk show content, advertising on talk shows has changed. Some advertisers who produce household products, such as Procter and Gamble, have cut back on the advertising they buy on shows such as Springer. But, due to the low cost of advertising on talk shows, other advertisers are willing to take their place. Advertisers such as the Professional Development Institute and Psychic Calling Center are now more prevalent on Springer than Procter and Gamble (*Advertising Age*, January 18, 1999:s7)

⁷ This has changed. In the Boston area there are now soaps which air as early as 11 a.m. (*Sunset Beach* on NBC, for example).

afternoon talk shows, advertisers could, in theory, keep female audiences entertained from morning to the evening. (9-12 a.m talk shows, 1-4 p.m. soaps and 4-6 p.m. talk shows). Usually, the racier talk shows such as *The Jerry Springer Show* and *Ricki Lake* are aired either in the morning or late at night, while shows such as *The Oprah Winfrey Show* and *Rosie O'Donnell* are broadcast at 4 p.m. when children are home from school.⁸ The late afternoon period is the more prestigious period because it is the lead-in to the evening news and has a higher viewership and higher advertising fees. (Shattuc, 1997:60)

At the height of talk show popularity in 1994⁹, the three major stations in Boston followed this scheduling format, as Jane Shattuc notes. (1997) At 10 a.m. the three stations programmed *Geraldo* (WHDH, CBS) *The Jerry Springer Show* (WCVB, ABC) and *Vicki!* (WBZ, NBC). The 11 a.m. slot had *Sally Jessy Raphael* (WCVB, ABC), and *Montel Williams* (WBZ, NBC). *Donahue* (WCVB, ABC) and *Maury* (WBZ, NBC) occupied the 4 p.m. time slot. *The Oprah Winfrey Show* had the top spot

⁸ Some broadcasters try to push the envelope by putting racier shows in the 4 p.m. slot. This happened in Detroit when WDIV (TV) Detroit moved the *Jerry Springer* show to 4 p.m. in 1998. This outraged community activists, City Council and the Board of Education who protested that this scheduling would mean that more unsupervised children would be exposed to adult subject matter. Nielsen research had shown that the show had a very high teenage and even pre-teen following. The television station decided to move the show back to its 10 a.m. time slot to avoid angering the community. (Trigoboff, 1998:98)

⁹ I use this period as an example because at the present time, due to the pressure to clean up talk shows, stations are programming more and more other reality based shows, especially Court Tv. Therefore, this pattern is not as clear cut at the present as it was in the mid-nineties.

at 5 p.m. (WCVB, ABC). We also see a single station WCVB, the Boston ABC affiliate, utilize this tactic in its daily schedule. It had *The Jerry Springer Show* and *Sally Jessy Raphael* in the morning block and *Donahue* and *Oprah* in the afternoon block. Soaps such as *One Life to Live* filled the middle period. (Shattuc, 1997:59)

3. BLAME IT ALL ON FOX

Another major change taking place in the late eighties and early nineties was the emergence of the 'fourth network' and the growth of independent stations and cable networks. As argued before, deregulation opened the broadcasting industry to speculative money. With this money, came outsiders who, for the first time, were willing to challenge the dominance of the three major networks. "Twenty years ago three television networks, ABC, CBS, and NBC, dominated the American airwaves. They faced no foreign competition at all. Yet today they are shrinking so fast, their very survival is in doubt," (Alvin Toffler quoted in Adams, W. and Eastman, S., 1997:100) For the first time in decades, new networks were being created. Fox was the first to enter into the fray in 1986.

In the 1980-1981 season, the three networks had average ratings of 18 (ABC) 19 (CBS) and 17.2 (NBC); by the 1995-6 season these ratings were down to 10.5, 9.6 and 11.6 respectively and Fox was not far behind at 7.3 (Adams and Eastman, 1997:100)

With the birth of a fourth network, the creation of the *United Paramount Network*(UPN) and *Warner Bros.*(WB) networks in 1995, and with the increasing competition from video cassette recorders (jokingly called the "the real number two network in the United States" (Adams and Eastman, 1997:100), the majors were facing the biggest fight for survival since the advent of television. But the new networks were also facing an uphill battle; they were entering a new environment where the majors had a distinct advantage. The majors were already established with studios, production houses and audience loyalty built over time. The new networks had to attract audiences from the majors and to do that, they had to offer something different. As well, the FCC initiated regulatory changes favoring the major networks.

In 1995 both the *Financial Interest and Network Syndication Rules*¹⁰ (Fin-syn) and the *Prime-Time Access*

¹⁰ Also known as Fin-Syn rules, they were FCC rules prohibiting broadcast network affiliates from owning an interest in the domestic syndication rights of most television and radio programs they carry. (Eastman and Ferguson, 1997:421)

Rules¹¹ (PTAR) were eliminated. Both of these rules were originally introduced in 1970, to "loosen the networks' monopolistic grip over the airwaves and to promote diversity among TV producers." (Abt and Mustazza, 1997:127) Together these two rules contributed to the expansion of syndication companies and independent stations. The fin-syn rule benefited Syndicators because it limited the competition in the off-network and first-run syndication markets by prohibiting networks from having financial interest in the syndication of shows they broadcast, unless these shows were solely produced in-house. Networks were also barred from getting into the first-run syndication market by the fin-syn rule. The PTAR rule benefited syndicators because network affiliates were required to set aside an hour of primetime for first-run syndicated shows. The hour between 7 and 8 p.m. was usually designated 'access hour' and was preserved for this purpose. Affiliate stations, therefore, needed shows to fill this primetime hour in which they could not broadcast network or off-network shows. They bought syndicated shows. (Eastman and Ferguson, 1997; Abt and Mustazza, 1997)

¹¹ Known as PTAR, this rule limited the number of prime time hours that the top 50 affiliates could devote to network originating programs and off-network reruns in the four hours beginning at 7 p.m. EST to three hours. (Eastman and Ferguson, 1997:428)

Independent stations benefited because both the fin-syn and PTAR rules limited the number of shows that the top major network affiliates could buy. Therefore, independent stations did not have to compete with the majors and their affiliates in purchasing some of their shows. "The practical effect of the off-network program ban is that 164 of the nation's 1,486 operating stations cannot broadcast certain programming...solely because it formerly appeared on a national network," complained one broadcaster(Jessell, 1993:78).

With the removal of the fin-syn rule, the major networks were able to compete with syndicators in the open market. The majors became syndicators, producing shows and then syndicating them to independent stations if affiliates could not be found in an area, or syndicating the off-network reruns of still running shows to the new networks.

Networks were also now permitted to produce shows for the sole purpose of syndicating them. Furthermore, with the demise of PTAR, network owned and affiliate stations could now fill the whole prime time slots with network or off-network fare.¹² Independent stations were hard hit

¹² This is not necessarily what happened. Even with the rule changes, many affiliates kept syndicated shows such as *Jeopardy*, *Wheel of Fortune* and syndicated tabloid shows such *Inside edition* in the early prime-time time slot.

because they now had to compete with affiliates in the top 50 markets in the nation for off-network programs whose prices were now going through the roof. These changes were seen as a way of leveling the field because the regulatory environment was seen to unfairly favor the new networks, especially Fox. The "financial syndication rules (fin-syn) and the prime-time access rules (PTAR) created a regulatory environment in which independent stations, cable networks, and the Fox network were cutting into the profitability of the networks," writes Douglas A. Ferguson. (1997:171)

This perception that the majors were being treated unfairly, and that these rules were out of step with the new broadcast reality, was echoed by the judge who made the ruling eliminating the fin-syn rule. He justified his decision by pointing to the growing competition in the broadcasting environment and the diminishing power of the major networks.

Even if a network controlled all the syndication of its network programming-an assumption not at all that clear in light of the entry of the Fox network and the increase in cable networks, the increased competition of independent TV stations and the tremendous source of program production-it appears that not a single network would control a sufficient share of the market to exercise monopoly power (Judge Manuel Real, quoted in *Broadcast and Cable*, November 22, 1993:16).

The creation of the new networks has fueled the growth of 'trash television', because these networks were unable

or unwilling to compete with the majors on their own turf. They needed something new and different to attract audiences from the majors. Trash television was a timely new form of programming which allowed them to achieve this objective. It allowed the new networks, especially Fox, to differentiate themselves from the old networks. It was not by coincidence that one of the most controversial talk shows was created for Fox. *Ricki Lake*, which premiered in 1993, was specifically designed to attract young audiences. Shattuc writes that *Ricki Lake* was a part of a campaign by Fox to create shows which would differentiate it from the majors. Shows such as *The Simpsons*, *In Living Color* and *Married...With Children*, appealed to "the exuberance and rebelliousness" of youth. (Shattuc, 1997:147) *Ricki Lake* embodies this approach. It is fast paced, confrontational and it targets young audiences. "*Ricki Lake* is the show most cited for innovating the no-holds-barred youth format of talk in the 1990's," writes Shattuc (1997:146-7).

The new networks also contributed to the rise of trash because they have made the broadcast environment more competitive. Their presence forces other broadcasters to cut costs while still attracting audiences. Talk shows allow them to achieve this objective.

4. AFFILIATES AND INDEPENDENT STATIONS

The changes that were taking place in the broadcast environment also created a shift in the balance of power between the major networks and affiliate stations. Traditionally, an affiliate was defined as "a broadcast station that carries the programs scheduled by the network on an exclusive basis in a market" (Ferguson, 1997:166). Also, as Ferguson notes, traditionally, an affiliate station "belonged to one of the three networks" (1997:166).

Because of their close relationship with the parent networks, affiliates were very different from independent stations.

From the start of American commercial television in the 1940's, nonaffiliates were the stepchildren of the television station family. In contrast to their big station brethren (affiliates of ABC, CBS, and NBC) who lived on a rich diet of new network programs, large network news divisions, and national advertisement and promotional support, independents survived on a thin gruel of syndicated reruns, movies, cartoons, and local team sports. Independents and affiliates lived parallel, but separate, lives. They were in the same business, but hardly competed (Aiken and Affe, 1997:193).

With deregulation, the emergence of new networks, and the growth of syndication, this relationship was being

transformed. Both affiliates and independents now had more choice than ever before. They began to flex their muscles.

Even as it became apparent that the rules would change, the revenue potential for networks heated up; studios like Viacom/Paramount and Time/Warner wanted to acquire or create networks. Every affiliate suddenly became more valuable to the networks, especially because the Fox network had bought several large-market affiliate stations (Ferguson, 1997: 171).

Suddenly, the bargaining power of all stations shot up. Affiliates "had become as powerful as free-agent football stars," writes Ferguson (1997:171). This increased power meant that stations, whether affiliate or independent, had more choice in what shows to pick from the networks and what shows to buy directly from syndicators¹³.

As a direct by-product of the competition between syndicators and the major networks, the most popular talk shows "belong to the competition for network audiences during the daytime" (Sedman and Shapiro, 1997:148). Most talk shows were not initially offered by the major networks but by affiliates who were willing to program first-run syndicated shows not originating on their parent network,

¹³ Syndicators are different from networks in that they do not have affiliates, but sell their programs to every possible station in the market. In any given market, a syndicator may sell different programs to all stations in that market but syndicators give exclusive rights to one station in each market. Syndicators are not always independent companies, many are owned by big broadcast and entertainment conglomerates. For example, the "parent companies of ABC, CBS, Fox, UPN, and WB...operate syndication companies as separate entities." (von Soosten, 1997:69) As a syndicator becomes more powerful and profitable it is likely to be bought by a major company. This can be seen in the recent purchases of both Multimedia and King World by USA Studios and CBS respectively.

and by independents who were looking for cheap programming to compete with affiliates.

Talk shows were especially valuable for daytime programming. "The three primary genres on network daytime schedules are talk shows, game shows, and **soap operas**," (emphasis in the original) write Sedman and Shapiro (1997:147). Independent stations and affiliates who did not give clearance to their parent network followed this format and programmed the same kind of genres to compete with network originating programs.¹⁴ Of the three genres, the easiest format was talk shows.¹⁵ The independents and affiliates bought the shows directly from syndicators such as *Multimedia* and *King World*.

In a survey by *Broadcasting and Cable* in 1994 at the *National Association of Television Program Executives* (NATPE) convention (Jan, 1994:66) station managers were asked to name their stations' greatest programming needs. Ranked as number one by these managers was a tie between talk shows and sitcoms. When asked the attraction of talk shows to programmers, conference participants responded

¹⁴ In the normal affiliate/network relationship an affiliate gives 'clearance' to a network, meaning it accepts to broadcast a network program. Sometimes the affiliate does not give clearance to its parent network. For example, when an affiliate programs a syndicated program such as a talk show which does not originate from its parent network, it is abandoning its parent network which is running another program at that time slot. An independent station on the other hand is not obliged to give any clearance to networks. It can pick and choose the shows to run at any given time period.

¹⁵ According to Sedman and Shapiro, soaps can cost upward of one million dollars and can take years to develop. Game shows are not as costly, but they are very hard to sell. (Sedman and Shapiro, in Eastman and Ferguson, 1997)

that independent stations were buying talk shows because "non-aligned independents see talk as good counter-programming or as a way to take on affiliates head to head." They also said that talk shows allowed broadcasters to fill time slots cheaply. Talk shows "allowed us to drop out of the bidding war for the best movies," responded one station manager (McClellan, 1994:88).

Talk shows offered an economically viable way for independent and affiliate stations to gain more freedom from the networks and to increase their negotiating power, without spending the kind of money necessary to buy a major drama or comedy show. Because the shows are syndicated, local affiliates are able to negotiate better deals with the production companies.

[S]yndicated talk shows net stations more money than network-produced shows do, since most stations buy syndicated shows with combination of cash and advertisement barter....For standard hour-long network-produced show, networks get 10 of the 12 minutes of ad time, leaving two minutes to the stations.... Syndicators only take about half of those 12 minutes, allowing local stations to sell the remaining time(Williams, 1993:s6).

Some stations actually form an identity around talk shows by buying in block. "Some stations are redefining themselves with talk" shows writes Mclellan (1994:88). This is especially true of independent stations and the new

networks. The UPN affiliate in Boston, for example, relies on blockbooking talk and other 'reality based' shows to fill its daytime slot. After its early morning schedule, which is fully comprised of children's programming, it airs *The Jerry Springer Show* at 9 a.m., *Judge Mills Lane* (a court TV reality show) at 10 a.m., *Jenny Jones* at 11 a.m., *Jerry Springer* again at 12 p.m, and another *Jenny Jones* at 1 p.m. The station then returns to airing children's programming at 2 p.m. when children are home from school.

Talk shows were so popular with affiliated stations in the early 1990s, it forced major networks to abandon certain time-slots. For example, talk show popularity was "partially responsible for NBC's abandonment of the 10 to 11 a.m. eastern time slot" in the early 1990s (Sedman and Shapiro, 1997:148).

Talk show popularity also forced major networks to change the way they deal with affiliates, as proven by the promise from John Miller, at the time NBC's executive vice president for advertisement and promotion and daytime programming, to act "more like a syndicator" in NBC's dealing with its affiliates. (Coe, 1992:26)

The networks have made some attempts to produce in-house talk shows. But they entered the game late. It was only in 1992, after they witnessed how lucrative talk shows

were, that major networks attempted to enter the daytime talks show market, with shows like *John and Leeza*, for which NBC signed an agreement with Paramount. (McCellan, 1993:68) As well, NBC affiliates signed an agreement with *Multimedia* for three of its shows. (Freeman, 1992:22) Shows such as *Regis and Kathy Lee* and *The View* are examples of network talk shows which have been relatively successful.

In this new and unstable broadcasting environment in which "stations, networks, studios, and advertisers... [were] jostling to stay ahead of the pack" (Aiken and Affe, 1997:193), talk shows, therefore, were attractive to all parties involved in the production, distribution and broadcasting of television programs. Their low-production costs made talk shows an ideal product for syndicators to offer to advertisers, who were interested in reaching women in non-primetime slots.

[S]yndication executives had to acknowledge the fact that the daytime talkshow was a 'lucrative, low-maintenance vehicle' too profitable to disregard. Its efficiencies were essentially for daytime blocks, when viewership-and revenue- were lower anyway (Munson, 1993:62).

Talk shows cost little to produce. In 1993, at the height of talk show popularity, talk shows cost, on average, \$220,000 per episode; in comparison, action shows

cost \$700,000-\$1.8 million per episode(Benson, 1993:1). As mentioned before, this low production cost was very attractive to an industry that was becoming very competitive and very risky for investors. Despite their lack of success in producing talk shows, even major networks ultimately realized that talk shows were a cheap way of filling daytime slots.

The studio-based talk show is a prime example of low-risk programming. Its minimal start-up and ongoing production cost make it a perfect format for the low-budget realm of daytime television. The talk show has been used to fill hour-long gaps in a network's schedule and has the potential to reach a desirable 25-54 female audience. Further, if a talk show host "connects" with the audience, the series can attract a very loyal audience on a daily basis. With studios and equipment almost always available, talk shows are one of the most easily instituted and adaptable of genres (Sedman and Shapiro,1997:147-8).

Talk shows were also attractive to production companies, because they were well-suited to the unstable, post-regulatory environment. They were easy to adapt to whatever seemed to be popular with the audience. They were television's equivalent of mobile capital; easy to move to wherever it can get the cheapest labor. For example, the two most popular shows at the present time are the *Jerry Springer Show* and *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, both located at the time of this writing in Chicago. When Oprah Winfrey was sued by cattlemen in Texas after she aired a show on Mad

Cow Disease, she moved the show to Texas and was able to continue taping (and gain public sympathy by talking about her trial experience) throughout the court proceedings. It is unlikely that an other major television show could accommodate such changes with little extra cost.

Therefore, production companies find talk shows an easier way to enter into the market without the capital and production know-how required by a drama or even a comedy. Munson notes that most of the talk show staff are "young, lowly paid" people who "spend endless hours on the phone seeking guests." He refers to them as "underpaid, overworked 25-year-olds" who will "burn out by age thirty"(1993:65-66).

A successful talk show could be around for a long time, producing wealth for its syndicators. If not successful, it can be cancelled with minimum losses. One station manager explained their attraction very well when he said, "you don't invest a lot of money in them, and if you run it up the flag pole and it doesn't fly, you are not out a lot of money." (Dino Corbin, General Manager, *KHSL-TV*, on *CNN News*, October 30, 1995) Talk shows, then, are easily disposable, a perfect fit for an industry which has become unstable and constantly changing (Munson, 1993:66).

It is estimated that for "its first six seasons, *King World's*¹⁶ *Oprah Winfrey Show* generated cumulative revenues of \$705" million (McCellan, 1992:24) *King World* is the biggest syndicator of first-run syndicated programs. It distributes not only *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, but also *Wheel of Fortune*, *Jeopardy*, *Judge Judy*, *Hollywood Squares*, *The Roseanne Show* and *The Martin Short Show*. It also distributed the now cancelled *Rolonda* and the short-lived *Les Brown*. *King World* shows are the most successful shows in syndication. In 1995, the company reported a 17% profit increase, most of which came from higher cash license fees for *Oprah* (Levin, 1995:23). In 1999, after much speculation and many possible suitors, Michael and Roger King- the two brothers who owned *King World*- sold it to CBS. What made *King World* very attractive to many major players in the industry was that it was "sitting on a mountain of cash reserves," according to *Broadcast and Cable* (Schlosser, 1998:14). It is estimated that the company has approximately a billion dollars in reserve and about 1.8 billion in receivable on its balance sheet.¹⁷ Most of that money came from talk shows. Before 1998, *Oprah Winfrey*

¹⁶ *King World* is the distributor of *The Oprah Winfrey Show* which is produced by Harpo Productions. As the syndicator, *King World* gets up to 42% of the revenue from the *Oprah* and it holds the rights to the show.

¹⁷ When CBS bought the company it made it clear this money was what attracted it. As one reporter put it, this gave CBS ready cash to go and "buy more radio and TV stations.(Schlosser, 1999:8)

counted for 40% of the company's income. (Broadcast and Cable, January 12, 1998:48)

Even talk shows which are not as popular as Oprah still make a lot of money. "Sally Jessy Raphael probably earns \$40 million for *Multimedia*, while {the now cancelled} *Geraldo* probably earns *Tribute* \$10 million in profit," wrote McClellan(1992:24).

In this chapter, I have discussed how talk shows have evolved from early audience participation shows. I introduced the concept of 'trash television' and discussed how it has become attached to some talk shows. I have also outlined how changes in the television industry contributed to the growth of talk shows and the move to more controversial subject matter. I have argued that due their lower cost and potential large profit, talk shows became attractive to broadcasters, production companies and advertisers. Talk shows, then, can be partially understood as a commodity driven by economic imperatives that have their origins in the search to maximize profits and minimize costs.

Chapter II

THE TALK SHOW/TRASH TALK DEBATE

In the previous chapter, I examined how changes in the television industry contributed to the rise and growth of talk shows. By 1995 there were more than 30 talk shows on the air. As competition became more intense, talk show subjects became racier and attracted larger audiences. The increasing popularity and proliferation of these shows did not go unnoticed. Indeed, talk shows have engendered one of the fiercest social debates over a television genre we have seen in the past twenty years. There have been conferences and round-tables, television interviews, and political debate about the effects of these shows on society. There are as many explanations for their existence and effect as there are political, economic, and social viewpoints. In this chapter, I will look at two major debates that surround talk shows.

The first debate is what one might call a popular debate which is mainly taking place in popular newspapers, radio, and television as well as in the political arena with both the U.S congress and municipal officials (such as

the Chicago City Council) jumping into the fray. This debate can be seen as a moral debate. At the heart of it is the argument that talk shows are a threat to the moral and mental well-being of American society. It is also a continuation of a long-standing debate about the role of television in society and whether there should be some kind of moral parameters which limit what television executives can put on the air.

The other debate is an academic debate which, while also concerned with societal morality, is more focused on examining talk shows as cultural text. Of course, these two debates are not separated by a well-defined line. They influence each other and, sometimes, the same individuals participate in both.

1. THE POPULAR DEBATE

Since the advent of television, the debate about the role of television in society has been ongoing. Those in the television industry, mindful of the constant threat of an outside watch dog, have always sought to self-regulate. Talk shows have caused a conflict within the industry between those who produce/program talk shows and those who

see talk shows as a threat to the very core of television respectability.

i. "POOR WOMAN'S NIGHTLINE"

The hosts and producers of talk shows defend them by presenting themselves as the defenders of the oppressed and the marginalized. They position themselves as heroes whose only crime is that they have given voice to those whom society would rather silence. They attack those who criticize their shows by accusing them of being elitist. In defending their shows, they adopt the language of the oppressed. They position themselves at the frontline of the fight for minority and women's equal rights. They claim to be at the vanguard of social change. They call their shows the "poor woman's *Nightline*" to align themselves with those whom society has marginalized; those whom mainstream shows, such as *Nightline*, have ignored.

Phil Donahue claimed his show served women. "We discovered women were out there in the daytime and dying for this kind of program. There was tremendous sexism among the decision makers. They thought women cared only about covered dishes and needlepoint," he said (Kurtz, 1996:54). He mocked his critics for being elitists. "Somebody's

'freaky' is another person's real personal problem," he declared (Kurtz, 1996:54). He called his show "your last hope when the cops arrest your sister." (Munson, 1993:140)

Geraldo Rivera asked "are these handful of critics from a relatively narrow slice of American society right and all those fifty million people wrong?" (Kurtz, 1996:60) He justified his show's existence because "it deal{t} with stories that are neglected by the *New York Times*." (Munson, 1993:140) And Jerry Springer asks if people have a problem with the subjects he covers or the kinds of people he has as guests. He claims his critics are just annoyed because he serves a sector of society they would like to ignore. The "thing which separates talk shows from the rest of television is that it is honest emotion," he claimed in one of his televised commentaries. (*The Jerry Springer Show*, January 3, 1997)

Springer also claims that talk shows like his are really the only television programs that do not exploit guests because cameras are not just shoved into the faces of innocent individuals to expose their private lives to the public without their permission; rather, people come to them of their own will. (*Larry King Live*, May 8, 1998) He says that the *Jerry Springer Show* is attractive to audiences "because it is real, because you sit home and

scratch your head and say wow, we see honest emotions." He uses this argument to justify the infamous on-camera fights, saying that the fights reflect real human reactions to emotional and provocative situations. Springer portrays himself as the champion of the weak and the oppressed and his detractors as elitist and racist groups, who are simply angry because he allows the marginalized to appear on television and be themselves.

Think about it. African American shows nowadays are put in the WB network, are put on UPN. If you are black and on American mainstream television, you have to dress white, talk white, look as if you are from the suburbs, the upper, middle-class suburbs. It is that perspective. I am not saying that there is anything wrong with that perspective. It is part of who I am, but it is wrong if that is the only thing that we have on American television. What is wrong to have one show like mine that is so crazy and outrageous and nuts. It should be. We should see it all, not just upper middle class whites (*Larry King Live*, May 8, 1998).

ii. "A CULTURAL ROT"

Other commentators, such as politicians, clergy, journalists, and civic leaders involved in trying to eradicate talk shows, take a different view. They see talk shows as "cultural rot" representing all that is morally wrong with America. Senator Joseph Lieberman accuses talk shows of promoting "abnormal, immoral behavior." (1996:19)

An editorial in the *Sacramento Bee* claimed that talk shows "provided some articulate warnings about the decline of civility in American culture"(January 21, 1996:FO4).

Meanwhile, Hillary Rodham Clinton expressed a fear that they are "changing the way that children feel about themselves in some very damaging ways for the children and the country." (Ball,1995:6)

Donna Shalala echoed these fears saying that we should be conscious of the public health consequences of these programs. She expressed concern for "a generation of teenagers who smoke too much, who are engaged in sexual activity, who simply are engaged in too much risky behavior, and they're getting ideas from talk shows." (CNN News, October 30,1995) Likewise, there has been pressure from the clergy. Rev. Micheal L. Pfleger, a *Chicago* clergyman who has been a long standing adversary of the *Jerry Springer Show*, wrote to the *Chicago* Police Superintendent demanding that guests of *Springer* who attack other guests on stage be arrested and charged with assault, just as they would be if the fight took place in the street. As a result, Jerry Springer was called to appear in front of the *Chicago* City Council on June 4, 1999 where city officials questioned and admonished him. Stations which carry *The Jerry Springer Show* around the country have

been targeted for picketing and some have been pressured to cancel the show.

NBC news anchor, Tom Brokaw, blasted the network after it signed a 6 year, \$36 million dollar deal with Geraldo Rivera in 1997. His objections were based on his fear that with Geraldo Rivera working for NBC news, the network would be "tagged as the most tabloid of the *Big Three* news divisions—"news lite" in the words of CBS anchor Dan Rather." (Johnson, 1997:D3) In 1997, when a major television station in Chicago hired Jerry Springer as a news commentator, two news anchors quit in protest. When Springer became the number one rated talk show in the U.S., knocking the *Oprah Winfrey Show* out of the number-one spot for the first time since 1987, *People Magazine* ran a special editorial in which they asked celebrities to complete the following sentence: "Jerry Springer's number-one daytime TV ratings is a sure sign that..." The first answer was from Jennifer Tilly, an actor, who said that it is a sure sign that "there are more trailers with television sets in America than we realized." (May 4, 1998:8&140)

Talk shows, then, and *The Jerry Springer Show* in particular, have become synonymous with 'low class' and are seen to represent a degrading and dangerous turn in

American cultural life. As a matter of fact, the word "Springer" is now used as an adverb or adjective describing the social degeneration of the United States. Bad manners, lewd acts and bad language in public space are now said to be a part of the "Springerizing" of America.

2. TALK SHOWS IN ACADEMIC DISCOURSE

The second debate concerning talk shows is an academic debate found in academic journals and books. When we look at academic research on talk shows, we find that there are common themes which run through much of the literature. In the following discussion, I will look at five of these themes.

1. *Talk shows as a new and oppositional public sphere.* In this argument writers use the work of Jurgen Habermas and/or Nancy Fraser to argue that these shows represent a changing, more democratic and inclusive public sphere.
2. *Talk shows as therapy.* Writers who argue from this position advance the view that talk shows play a therapeutic role, by allowing people to speak about their traumatic experiences. Detractors argue that talk shows represent a kind of 'pseudo-therapy'; enticing

- people with a promise of resolution that they cannot offer.
3. *Talk shows as a confessional/normalizing practice.* These arguments use Michel Foucault's writings as a basis to demonstrate that talk shows are part of the mechanism of power in a disciplined society.
 4. *Talk shows as postmodern text.* In this argument talk shows are seen as a product of postmodern culture, reflecting postmodern ethos, themes and textual structures.
 5. *Talk shows as drama.* In this argument talk shows are seen as a social drama in which participants are playing dramatic roles.

1. TALK SHOWS AND THE PUBLIC SPHERE

A central concern of many writings on talk shows is the nature of the public sphere and how talk shows are located in relation to this concept. Jurgen Habermas's writings on the public sphere play a key role in this debate. In his book, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: an Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (1989), Habermas argues that in the 17th and 18th century, Western Europe witnessed the birth what he calls a

'public sphere'. He describes this as "a forum in which the private people" come together to debate public matters(1989:25). The primary purpose of this coming together was to "compel public authority to legitimate itself before public opinion." (1989:25-26) The public sphere was, therefore, formed by private citizens to debate issues of public interest in an arena outside both the private realm which is ruled by private interests and the state apparatus. It was "a site governed neither by the intimacy of the family, the authority of the state, nor the exchange of the market, but by 'public reason of private citizens'" (Peters, 1993:541). Habermas argues that the only requirement for participation in the public sphere was reason. It was inclusive. No one was excluded *a priori*.

Nancy Fraser's article, "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy" (1990), contains a thorough critical examination of Habermas's conceptualization of the public sphere. Fraser argues that the concept of the public sphere is a valuable tool; however, Habermas comes up short in his examination of late capitalist society because of his inability to recognize the exclusionary nature of the bourgeois public sphere and the existence of competing public spheres.

Fraser argues that Habermas's claim that the bourgeois public sphere was open and inclusive could be challenged. Writers such as Mary Ryan, Joan Landes and Geoff Eley have argued "that despite the rhetoric of publicity and accessibility....[the] official public sphere rested on, indeed was importantly constituted by, a number of exclusions." (Fraser, 1990:59) These exclusions were based on social markers such as race, gender, ethnicity and class. For example, the public sphere in France was built in opposition to the 'effeminate' salon culture.

The bourgeois public sphere, as its name indicates, was constituted by a specific class which frequented a "network of clubs and associations—philanthropic, civic, professional, and cultural." (Fraser, 1990:60) Its inclusiveness was limited to men who belonged to these organizations. Therefore, the bourgeois public sphere, despite its claims to inclusion and equality, embodied social codes which excluded and silenced many groups.

Fraser asserts that, in his theorization, Habermas also ignores the fact that because of the bourgeois public sphere's exclusionary nature, other competing and alternative public spheres existed and flourished. These publics allowed different modes of communication and were more inclusive. They elaborated "alternative styles of

political behavior and alternative norms of public speech." (1990:61) For example, women had their own publics in which issues important to them were debated. These other publics had a 'conflictual' relationship with the bourgeois public sphere because they contested "the exclusionary norms of the bourgeois public." (1990:61) The bourgeois public sphere, on its part, "sought to block broader participation" in the public sphere. (1990:61) It sought to eliminate these other publics and it presented itself as the only legitimate public. This is the position Habermas's writings reflect.

Many writers, especially feminist writers, like the idea of alternative or oppositional public spheres advanced by Fraser because, as Sonia Livingstone notes, the idea of multiple and alternative publics spheres "aims for a negotiated compromise among diverse, interested publics through a discussion." (1994:430)

Theorists who look at talk shows in the context of the public sphere argue that talk shows make a positive contribution to democracy because they introduce the views and opinions of ordinary citizens into the discussion of public policy.

Livingstone and Lunt, for example, suggest that talk shows heralded a new role for television. They argue that, for much of its history, television served as a tool for the powerful. It was a top-down, one way street. Its main function was to serve as a mouthpiece for the elite by 'acting as spokesperson for government', for example, or by informing the public about issues deemed important by the powers that be, or by 'editorializing on behalf of preferred policies or parties' (Livingstone and Lunt, 1994:4-5)

Writers who view talk shows this way claim that talk shows 'exemplify' a radical shift in "the frameworks within which the apparatuses of mass communication and popular culture operate." (Carpignano and al., 1990:35) They are said to be a 'forum' where issues of public interest can be discussed by ordinary citizens. Talk shows are viewed as offering those who were previously marginalized a chance to speak 'in their own voice'. In this context, talk shows open up public discussion to wider participation. They convey "opinions, experiences, information and criticism 'upward' to the elite." (Livingston and Lunt, 1994:4-5)

Talk shows "constitute a 'contested space' in which new discursive practices are developed in contrast to the traditional modes of political and ideological

representations," according to Carpignano and al. (1990:35) They are spaces in which different segments of society meet and confront each other, bringing with them different ideas, arguments and beliefs. Thus they represent an alternative public sphere because they do not seek consensus but rather a negotiated compromise between diverse groups and interests. By focusing on compromise rather than consensus they allow different voices to speak and they accommodate the complexity of society made of people of different races, cultures, religions, sexes and genders. The talk show, "as a forum for the expression of diversity, the contestation of multiple positions, and the interfacing of many discourses becomes a part of contemporary political process," write Livingstone and Lunt (1994:34) Talk shows organize "new antagonisms in the contemporary formation of democratic struggle," argues Masciarotte (1991:84). They are forums in which different views are welcomed and in which many different segments of society debate, challenge, negotiate and compromise.

Talk shows are also said to redefine the very concepts of public and private. They embody the feminist idea in the 'politicization of the private'. They reflect the belief that "there is no area of politics that is not personal and no space where the personal is exempt from the politics."

(Masciarotte, 1991:88) Talk shows, these writers argue, expand what is considered public by allowing people to tell their "private stories in public". They undermine "the distinction between public and private." (Livingstone and Lunt, 1994:180) They allow private experience and needs to "decide policy'. They permit ordinary persons to influence public policy based on their 'everyday experience'. (Livingstone and Lunt, 1994:33)

Carpignano et al. claim that the "talk show rejects the arrogance of a discourse that defines itself on the basis of its difference from common sense," (1990:52) They see talk shows as a space in which "the authority of the expert is replaced by the authority of a narrative informed by lived experience." (1990:53) Munson argues that talk shows validate the experience of the ordinary citizen. "The talk show reidentifies knowledge with knower," he writes (1993:10). And Livingstone and Lunt surmise that the talk show format is more democratic because it recasts "the expert/lay relationship." (1994:103)

At the heart of the preceding argument regarding talk shows as a new and more inclusive public sphere, is the belief that talk shows are progressive and worthwhile for three key reasons:

1. They represent a new kind of alternative public sphere which is more inclusive;
2. Talk shows allow private experiences to be discussed on television, thus breaking down the public/private dichotomy; and
3. Talk shows value ordinary experiences over expert opinions and are, therefore, more democratic than other public arenas where issues are discussed.

There are several problems with these arguments. The first concerns the assumption that by simply including that which was previously excluded on television, television is somehow more inclusive. Nancy Fraser tells us that there are codes and modes of conduct, in the public sphere which can function to exclude those who are formally included. "[D]iscursive interaction within the bourgeois public sphere was governed by protocols of style and decorum that were themselves correlated and markers of status inequality," she writes (1990:63). As my textual analysis in the next chapter will demonstrate, simply having diverse participants and views on a television show does not create an inclusive format.

A similar problem occurs with the assumption that allowing private experiences to be showcased on talk shows makes the latter necessarily progressive. The question is,

are these private experiences given the same weight as the 'objective', 'rational' opinions of the experts? I will argue, no. I will argue that despite their apparent inclusiveness, talk shows still embody elements of the same exclusive characteristics as other television genres, and that any celebration of their 'transformative' aspects is premature. All may be allowed to appear, but all opinions are not given equal weight. It is well and good to speak of the 'consensus' reached when private persons gather to discuss issues of public concern, but one must remember that whenever a group of people congregate, issues of power, legitimacy and hierarchy arise and frame the resulting discussions. The definition of talk shows as an 'alternative public sphere' assumes that open entry means equality. But, as Fraser points out, when individuals of unequal social status come together in a public arena to debate, the less powerful can be silenced.

To have a deeper understanding of the actual and/or potential inclusiveness of talk shows, we must also look "at the process of discursive interaction within formally inclusive public arenas." (Fraser, 1990:63) In other words, we must look at the processes at work in a public arena which might privilege some opinions over others.

2. TALK SHOWS AS THERAPY

Another theme present in the literature on talk shows is to analyze them as a confessional or therapeutic practice. The talk show therapy "field is dominated by psychologists, psychiatrists, psychotherapists, social workers, and relationship counselors." (Shattuc, 1997:31) These 'tele-advisers' dispense advice about all aspects of women's life from child-rearing and relationship building to job hunting and self-development.

There are three main objections raised by those who examine talk shows' therapeutic aspects. First, many writers are frustrated by the fact that talk shows present what has been called a 'pseudo-therapy' to entice guests and to increase viewership. Secondly, others vilify the so-called on-screen experts who give two- second counselling sessions and who act more like actors than psychotherapists. Thirdly, some writers object to what they see as talk shows' inability to deal with issues at the social/structural level.

For example, Abt and Seesholtz (1994) claim talk shows act as an "electronic confessional" which encourages "show and tell" rather than providing cures. They argue that, traditionally, a psychotherapist is supposed to carefully

evaluate her patient's history, deal with issues that the patient is ready to handle, fit the therapy to the patient's needs, respect the patient's privacy and make sure there is a follow-up. Talk show therapy on other hand is a "vulgarized version of traditional psychotherapy" which serves to structure and rationalize and legitimate the exploitation of private pains and individual pathology." (1994:184) Talk shows use the suffering of those in pain to gain ratings, they argue.

Still, others say that an effective therapy is impossible within the confines of commercial television. Jane Shattuc, for example, notes that "due to the limits of educated communication within the constraints of mass-consumed therapy" the talk show expert "evokes a socially current trope or discourse (for example, self-esteem, twelve steps, multiculturalism) as short hand for a wider sensibility or practice." (1997:31)

Robin Andersen (1995:171) argues that talk show therapy is really nothing but a deceptive maneuver to dupe the public into believing that the talk show producers have the public good at heart, when what really matters to them are ratings. "That ratings matter more than 'healing' the guests is evident from the amount of time the show's producers allot the teletherapists," which is two minutes

per guest, she writes. She argues that, at its best, "the talk show is about emotional empathy, a hope held out for understanding." (1995:171) But the present talk shows do not render even this small service; they function "predominantly as a public confessional."

(Andersen, 1995:171)) She argues that the appearance of therapists at end of the show is not for the benefit of the guests but because "[a]fter almost an hour of conflict and cross-talk, these narrative spectacles demand some type of closure." (1995:171)

Andersen argues that the sole function of the so-called expert is to "cajole antagonistic guests into hugging just before the credits role," to give the appearance of closure. Their "quick clichés promoting self-esteem offer dubious therapeutic content, but they do serve to legitimate the TV-talk spectacle." (1995:171)

Writers also note that talk show experts fail to put the problems faced by women in their proper context. "Talks shows claim to be engaging in public testimony-for the betterment of all. But when that testimony is gathered within a social and political void, the once-honorable practice amounts to little more than public humiliation" (Andersen, 1995:171).

Abt and Seesholtz argue that the therapeutic approach of talk shows itself is a reflection of an inability on the part of television as a whole to deal with "abstractions" and "structures", or with problems at the societal level. They say that the therapeutic approach allows the shows to focus on "'therapy' not on social change." (1994:177) And Janice Peck accuses them of "framing social issues in psychological terms" thereby minimizing the social origins of personal problems. (1995:58)

An interesting aspect of the therapeutic role of talk shows is the presupposition in many of the writings that there is some kind of pathology present in the guests. The subject of debate is not the necessity of having therapists on these shows in the first place, but rather whether the therapists are able to help the 'patients'; whether they are capable therapists. I will argue that it is the therapists' very presence which should be questioned; it labels the guests as pathological, and in need of therapy. As well, as the above writers have suggested, the therapeutic approach allows talk shows to side-step questions of social responsibility and social change.

3. TALK SHOWS AS A CONFESSIONAL/NORMALIZING PRACTICE

In many of his writings Michel Foucault discusses the role of the confession in the birth of the disciplined society. In the first volume of *the History of Sexuality*(1978), he wrote that the

confession has spread its effect far and wide. It plays a part in justice, medicine, education, family relationships, and love relations, in the most ordinary affairs of everyday life, and in the most solemn rites; one confesses one's crimes, one's sins, one's thoughts and desires, one's illnesses and troubles; one goes about telling, with the greatest precision, whatever is most difficult to tell(1978:59).

He saw the confession as a mechanism of power and truth; a tool by which knowledge was produced and power was exercised. It has become "one of the West's most highly valued techniques for producing truth," he noted. (1978:59) According to Foucault, a confession does not take place in a vacuum. It is a "ritual that unfolds within a power relationship, for one does not confess without the presence (or virtual presence) of a partner who is not simply the interlocutor but the authority who requires the confession, prescribes and appreciates it, and intervenes in order to judge, punish, forgive, console, and reconcile." (1978:61-

62) Thus a confession is embedded within a power relationship.

An example of an area in which the confession plays a role is the regulation of sex and sexuality. Foucault argued that from the beginning of the eighteenth century, one observes in Western society a "veritable discursive explosion" concerning sex. (1978:17) This was not just an incidental phenomena but a part of a wider transformation of the mechanism of power. It was an aspect of a new form of social control; a new way of "policing of sex" not through "the rigor of a taboo...(but) through useful and public discourse." (1978:25) In this new society, sex was "not simply condemned or tolerated but managed, inserted into systems of utility, regulated for the greater good of all....Sex was not something one simply judged; it was a thing one administered " (1978:24) The confession was one of the main tools of regulating sex.

Some writers see talk shows as a part of this mechanism of power (Nelson and Robinson, 1994, McLaughlin, 1993). They view them as a confessional where issues such as sex, especially 'deviant' sexual practices, are talked about with the objective of categorizing and managing them. They see talk shows as a tool of social control where deviant behavior is segregated and managed. These writers

see the ultimate role of talk shows as reinforcing normative proscription, through on-screen confessions.

An example of this position can be seen in "Chastity Criminals in the Age of Electronic Reproduction: Re-Viewing Talk Television and the Public Sphere" (McLaughlin, 1993). The author makes a connection between the historical construction of female criminality and deviance and the representation of prostitution on talk shows. She argues that far from providing a forum for the marginalized to voice their views, talk shows serve a normalizing function with the experts on the shows playing the same role as those who categorized and controlled female "chastity criminals" in the 19th century. Talk show experts

confront a situation, first problematizing it and then normalizing it. They come armed with knowledge, records, and scientific data but then simplify it for the "masses"...But simplification arising within the apparatus of sexuality always assumes their opposite ('good sex' assumes 'bad sex') (McLaughlin, 1993:48).

The author argues that these kinds of practices "normalize judgments", reducing everything to opposing dichotomies of good and evil. (1993:48)

The author also points out that even when the marginalized, such as prostitutes, are invited to speak and put forth their position as experts, they face a "crisis of legitimacy". They want to join the mainstream, to be seen

as professionals. This adds to their marginalization because, in their search for validation and acceptance, they high-light their very 'abnormality' (1993:49)

In "Reality Talk" or "Telling Tales?", Nelson and Robinson also argue that talk show narratives represent a normalizing practice where what appears to be an open discussion of a subject is in fact the process through which power is exercised.

Within the context of the television talk show, discussions of the "sexual deviant" may not simply illustrate an attempt to satisfy audience desire for knowledge about sexual practices and /or to titillate but to regulate, impose normative categories on, judge, and manage sex(1994:54).

They argue talk shows present "a polarized view of a conforming majority and a deviant minority buttressed with stereotypical images of the "deviant"(1994:52). They claim that talk show content "reinforces and replicates culturally normative views of gender and sexuality," thus reproducing and validating the dominant discourses. (1994:55)

The writers who speak on the subject of talk shows as a confessional or a normalizing practice raise some very important points. The confessional's implicit power relations, its search for a transgression, the implication of the bad/good dichotomy, point to some of the major

problems raised by talk shows. This position on talk shows as confessional/normalizing informs my own textual analysis. The confessional as a form of expression is itself a frame which labels a behavior or expression as 'deviant' since one must have transgressed in order to confess. As well, the presence of the authority or expert to whom one must confess is part of the frames which I will examine. One problem which can arise in using this approach is that of essentializing the text and/or discourse. This happens because of the focus on the controlling effect of the confessional. There is an assumption of textual unity and that the confession can contain whatever is said. But the confessional can be liberating and transformative because it brings out in the open things which were previously hidden and silenced.

4. TALK AS A POSTMODERNIST TEXT

Some theorists have pointed to what they perceive as the 'postmodernist' character of the talk show (White, 1992; Munson, 1993; Livingstone and Lunt, 1994, Anderson, 1995). Mimi White argues that therapeutic television such as talk shows can be seen as "one manifestation of postmodern logic." (1992:21) And Livingstone and Lunt call them "a site

for the playing out of the postmodern condition." (1994:175) Thus, they should be examined within the context of the postmodern cultural forms in which they are produced. They say that, like other postmodern texts, talk shows disintegrate the boundaries between authority and layperson, subject and object, reality and fiction. (Munson, 1993) They also point to what they see as the talk show's validation of difference, its ability to bring "together a constellation of voices," as a proof of its postmodernist origins. (Munson, 1993:10) Talk shows, they argue, rupture textual continuity, refuse the 'master narrative' of modernity by inviting differences, and break the suture of modernist texts by inviting audience participation. Like postmodernity itself, talk shows represent "a crisis not only in modernist epistemology but in its teleological social project and its technological divisions of world, self, and endeavor into separate spheres in which the professional-expert has authority and control" (Munson, 1993:12).

When contemplating talk shows within the context of postmodern texts, the question begs to be asked, what does it all mean? If the talk show text is part of a wider socio-cultural crisis and a rebellion against modernist logic, where do we go from there? The postmodern

explanation is too narrowly focused on the images of talk show and the textual tactics it uses. In other words, the images become the object of analysis, and the social relations embedded in them become secondary. Therefore, I find it problematic.

5. TALK SHOWS AS A STAGED DRAMA

Writers such as Robin Andersen argue that talk shows are nothing but a staged drama.

In the face of Sally's claim to be doing "reality television," it is immediately apparent that everything about her talk show- from the planning stage, to the search for victims, to the development of the gimmicks of the format, to the audience preparation and group dynamics- is fraudulent. (Andersen, 1995:168)

Abt and Seesholtz compare talk shows to the world presented by Erving Goffman in his 'dramaturgical analysis of social encounters'. He "demonstrated how people construct alternative worlds that are viewed as not quite real, or ordinary, and that free participants to play and have fun." (1994:179) In his book *Frame Analysis*, for example, Goffman argues that our behavior and the response to it change as the frame in which the behavior takes place

changes¹⁸. He argues that some behaviors which are not acceptable in 'real life', may be allowed if framed in a game or play situation.

When the frame is shifted, say, to bluff games, and this frame gives the player assurance that his dissembling will be seen as 'not serious' and not improper, then magnificently convincing displays occur....In brief, we all have the capacity to be utterly unblushing, provided only a frame can be arranged in which lying will be seen as part of the game and proper to it. (Goffman, 1974:573)

A crucial point in Goffman's analysis is that, for certain activities to be acceptable, they must be removed from the 'real' and framed as a play or drama.

Writers who use Goffman's framework, argue that talk shows are the kind of play or drama which Goffman referred to, because they allow people to meet in an insulated place which is removed from the real world and engage in behaviors that would not be acceptable in everyday life. Thus people are able to say and do things that they would not ordinarily participate in. Abt and Seeholtz argue that talk shows allow guests "to ignore the conventional constraints of the everyday world." (1994:178) Talk show participants are freed from the rules of the "outside judgmental world" that constrain their actions in normal or real life situations. (1994:178)

¹⁸ Goffman defines frame as the "principles of organization which govern events" (1974:10).

But the writers also see a danger in this game that is played out on talk shows. They say that, whereas in Goffman's play situation there was a clear demarcation between the drama or play and the 'real' world, talk shows remove that barrier by claiming to be presenting 'real' stories. "In Goffman's game situations, 'transformation rules' and rules of irrelevance clearly distinguish for most participants the so-called make believe game world from the everyday world" (Abt and Seeholtz, 1994:179). Abt and Seeholtz find the fact that talk shows do not maintain that distinction troubling. They argue that, by bombarding viewers with 'real-life' images of people engaging in abnormal and deviant behaviors, talk shows undermine "the basis for cultural judgment". They erode "social barriers, inhibitions and cultural distinctions." (1994:171) Thus they pose a threat to society.

Nelson and Robinson (1994) also see talk shows as an example of Goffman's staged drama. "Rather than viewing the disclosures presented before the cameras as either "spontaneous" or "true confessions" the entire program may be more accurately seen as offering a deliberately crafted and stylized depiction of its subject matter," they write (1994:55). Despite this, the authors argue, the way the discourses on talk shows are constructed can tell us

something about our society. For example, the roles women, ethnic and sexual minorities and working class people play tells us something about what we perceive to be appropriate roles for these groups.

Authors who argue that talk shows are a staged drama raise two main concerns regarding talk shows. First, they challenge the idea that these shows present "real life". Secondly, they argue that despite the game-like character of talk shows, they have real negative affects on audiences and society because they either render abnormal and deviant behaviors normal (Abt and Seeholts) or because they normalize social roles (Nelson and Robinson). In either case, the authors assert that the audience is negatively affected because while the guests, host and producers of these shows know that the shows are staged, the viewers are misled. In the article by Abt and Seeholtz there is a strong moralistic tone; the authors clearly state that they view talk shows as a social threat.

The game-like description of talk shows is intriguing and it certainly can be argued that talk shows are staged games in which the object is to see who will stray the farthest away from socially acceptable norms. But I think that, as Nelson and Robinson(1994) point out, we can learn a lot about a society by looking at what kind of 'games' it

constructs and what kind of roles individuals who belong to different segments of society are assigned in those shows.

In this chapter I have tried to outline the terms of the debate concerning talk shows. I have proposed that there are two major debates about talk shows. These two debates are not separate, but intersect at various places. The first debate I examined was what I consider a popular debate which takes place in the radio, television, magazines and daily newspapers. The participants in this debate included people within the industry and other figures such as politicians and social activists.

I discussed how those who work in other television information programs resented talk shows and talk show hosts because they felt that they were threatening the respectability of the television industry. I also touched on how those who work in talk show programs defended their shows by adapting a progressive language, protesting that they were fighting for the poor and the marginalized and that those who attacked them were elitists. Furthermore, we have seen how politicians and clergy became involved in the debate, attacking talk shows as a danger to America's moral fabric.

I also examined the academic debate and we saw how writers seek to locate talk shows as a cultural text. We have examined five different themes which one finds in writings about talk shows. We saw how some writers theorized that talk shows represent a new and more inclusive public sphere(s), while other writers spoke of talk shows as an example of the pseudo-therapy that pervades American culture. Some of the writers examined talk shows as confessionals similar to those described by Michel Foucault, whose main function was to manage and control sexual deviants, while some argued that talk shows were a postmodern cultural form displaying all the conflict and chaos of the postmodern society in which they were created. Finally, some writers speak of talk shows as staged drama or play similar to those theorized by Erving Goffman.

The purpose of this chapter was to give an overview of the terms of the debate on talk shows and to help form a clearer idea about the themes and viewpoints that one finds in the public debate and academic literature concerning talk shows. In so doing, there are three theoretical issues which emerge.

The first issue concerns talk shows' relationship to the public sphere. From the beginning, talk shows were celebrated as a forum for the disfranchised and the marginalized to speak. They are frequently examined in relation to their contribution to the democratization of the public sphere. They are seen by some as giving those who previously were excluded from the public sphere a space to speak and express their views. Viewed this way, talk shows give voice to the silenced and, in doing so, they redefine what our culture defines as knowledge by locating knowledge not in scientific theories, but within personal experience. From this vantage point, talk shows can be said to represent a revolutionary shift in television. This is the position taken by those who advance talk shows as changing the public sphere.

On the other side of this same argument are those who attack talk shows for their celebration of deviance. They argue that by bringing the lowest form of human behavior in the open, talk shows threaten the public sphere. They reduce free speech to verbal attacks and they diminish democracy.

The second issue has to do with that of the therapeutic role of talk shows. Many writers argue that talk shows offer pseudo-therapy with the objective of

attracting both guests and audiences in order to make money. These writers argue that, due to the format of television, talk shows are incapable of dealing with the complexity of the problems faced by the guests. As well, talk show therapists fail to put the problems faced by the guests in their social contexts; therefore, they fail to provide any useful solutions for the guests.

The third issue concerns the argument that talk shows act as a confessional similar to that theorized by Michel Foucault. In this view, talk shows play a normalizing role. They both identify deviance and normalize it. They create binaries of good/bad with the purpose of containing and managing deviance. In the final analysis, they reproduce dominant values and beliefs.

Drawing on these arguments raised in this literature review and Robin Patric Clair's theory on framing devices (to be addressed in the next chapter), I propose to examine textual examples of talk shows to illustrate these themes.

CHAPTER III

NARRATIVES AND FRAMING DEVICES

In an article entitled "The Use of Framing Devices to Sequester Organizational Narrative: Hegemony and Harassment," (1993) Robin Patric Clair argues that within any given organization, different stories or narratives receive different treatment. By stories she means discussions about events, situations or other activities which take place within an organization. Examples of stories she is talking about are stories that are circulating in the office about productivity, promotions or sexual harassment.

Patric Clair argues that some organizational narratives are made public and are officially discussed. These are the stories which are told in public spaces and in the boardrooms. These are the stories which are made available to researchers. They are the stories that an organization puts out for public consumption. They are granted "public status". On the other hand, there are other stories that are not as easily available, stories that are whispered at lunch tables, and at the water fountains,

stories that even researchers ignore because they are hard to gain access to. These stories "do not receive the same public exposure, legitimization, or respect within the organization" as do the 'public status' stories (1993:114). She calls these stories "sequestered stories". "The term 'sequestered' refers to stories that are set apart from the mainstream" (Patric Clair, 1993:114).

An example of sequestered stories, according to Patric Clair, is sexual harassment narratives. She says that within organizations sexual harassment is discussed among "coworkers, close friends, or relatives" (1993:114) but it is not brought out into the public. It is not considered to have the same status as the mainstream narratives which are legitimized by organizations.

This sequestering of some organizational narratives is possible because within an organization "there are implicit rules in story telling, (who can tell it to whom, where and how)" (1993:114). These rules determine how a story is treated within an organization. How a story is told is central to sequestering because it relates to the framing of the story. For example, in the case of sexual harassment it is important to look at whether the story is told as a joke, by blaming oneself, by excusing the actions of the harasser, or universalizing it by saying everyone does it.

How a story is framed "severely impact{s} the kind and amount of exposure the story will receive" (1993:114).

Patric Clair lists six "framing devices" used in the telling of sequestered stories such as those about sexual harassment. She describes 'framing devices' as "rhetorical\discursive practices that define or assign interpretation to the social event by the actor or actors." She calls them a "kind of meta-narrative that influences interpretation but is not part of the content" (1993:119). What framing devices do is delimit the meaning of a story and assign a value to it. They "are involved in the evaluation of the message" (1993:117). The six framing devices analyzed "are especially pertinent to the sequestering of organizational narratives," according to Patric Clair. (1993:118) They are:

"accepting the dominant interest as universal", "simple misunderstanding", "reification", "trivialization", "denotative hesitancy", and 'private/public expression and private/public domain" (1993:118).

Patric Clair's theorization of the sequestering of organizational narratives is useful in examining talk shows. Using her work as an heuristic model, one can speak of talk show narratives as 'sequestered narratives' in the same way in which sexual harassment stories are set aside

and sequestered in organizations. One can look at talk shows as the space where stories which represent the television equivalent of sexual harassment stories in an organization are separated from other mainstream stories. These stories are set-aside and are not given the same public status as other stories on television such as the news. The frames which Patric Clair presents in her analysis of sequestered stories provide a useful and concrete tool to examine the ways in which talk show narratives are sequestered and separated from mainstream stories.

Two of the framing devices presented by Patric Clair are not applicable to my analysis and will not be used in this thesis. The first of these is "accepting dominant interests" which refers to the victims of sexual harassment agreeing to place the organization's interest over their own. The other one is "simple misunderstanding", which refers to victims accepting a contradictory explanation which justifies the lack of action on the part of the authorities to punish perpetrators of sexual harassment.

The four framing devices which are relevant to my analysis are trivialization, denotative hesitancy, private/public expression and reification/normalization. I will now provide a more detailed definition of these four

framing devices which I will use as analytical tools in my textual analysis.

1. TRIVIALIZATION:

The first framing device is trivialization which refers to a process in which the views of an individual or group are rendered invalid by being trivialized.

"Trivialization as a form of negation can be accomplished through 'humor, ridicule, or metaphor'." It can be "achieved by making light of the narrative event," (e.g., turning it into a joke) writes Patric Clair. (1993:120)

Trivialization has long been a way of negating the narratives of the oppressed. For example, for a long time blacks were only allowed to speak if they made themselves objects of ridicule and made people laugh. Women's stories were also demeaned by labeling them as gossip and not serious. In sexual harassment, "harassers often frame their actions in terms of 'harmless entertainment'" (1993:120)

2. DENOTATIVE HESITANCY:

This framing device refers to the inability of the dominated group to speak for itself. The dominated group

can be seen as a "muted" group, not able to express its own views either because it is not allowed or because it does not have access to the official or institutional language. Therefore, the group is forced to accept "its own limited definition of self as dependent on the dominant group." (1993:120) The dominant group in this way dominates through its control of the means of expression. Patric Clair cites Spencer's contention (1984) that "if the dominant group can control the language of the culture then it is possible that the subordinated group may be without the means of expression necessary to convey their [sic] own experience." (1993:120)

The power of language, in both oppression and in the fight for equality, is undeniable. When we speak of language, we are speaking of the ability to speak of our experiences, to demand our rights and to articulate the issues that are important to our very existence. "Language must be recognized as one of the most significant human resources; it functions in a multitude of ways to affirm, contradict, negotiate, challenge, transform, and empower particular cultural and ideological beliefs and practices" (Darder, 1991:101). Language has always been the providence of power, a tool wielded to exclude and banish certain groups from the public sphere. It has served as a

marker of class, race, ethnicity and sexual identity. It is seldom neutral. The exclusion of certain dialects, certain ways of speaking, from the public sphere has meant the exclusion of particular experiences and stories from the public consciousness because "{l}anguage constitutes one of the most powerful media for transmitting our histories and social realities, as well as for thinking and shaping the world" (Darder, 1991:101).

3. PUBLIC/PRIVATE DICHOTOMY

This dichotomy defines what can be expressed in what domain and what values are attached to different types of expression. Patric Clair identifies two different dichotomies within the public/private binary. She talks about private expression which refers to "characteristics of communication or text." (1993:121) It has to do with how what is told is told. "{P}rivate expression is spontaneous, emotional, symbolic, sincere, and reactive; public expression is codified, repeatable, and sign-like," she explains. On the other hand, there is what she defines as "private/public domain" which refers to the "definition of a situation". The private domain is more closed, open to only close relatives and friends, while the public domain

is open to the everyone. So if a story is told to friends or family in an informal setting which is only open to those who are close to the story-teller, it is defined as a private matter. Labeling stories, such as those about sexual harassment, private serves to "individuate, devalue, pathologize, and isolate women's reaction to an experience which is common and shared." (MacKinnon, 1979:87).

Through this framing device, socially rooted problems are individualized and the systemic origins are overlooked. The private/public dichotomy also assigns blame solely to the individual, assuming that the individual must change his/her situation rather than expect changes at the institutional level. This kind of thinking short-circuits the struggle for change because "the ability to comprehend institutionally is essential to the struggle against racism and other forms of social oppression." (Darder, 1991:38)

The public/private framing device is very important because, historically, the very act of participating in the public sphere required that one be "disinterested". In the United States Congress, the ultimate 'public space', roll calls are made by saying "the gentlemen from Virginia, etc", meaning that even individual names are removed. Participants, in fact, wear a public persona as the representative of a state. Public issues are, then,

supposed to be discussed for the greater good rather than because of personal gain. Framed in personal terms, talk show narratives are viewed in contrast to these 'rational, disinterested, universal' discussions which are historically found in the public arena. Viewed in this context, the personal issues discussed on talk shows are perceived as emotionally laden and irrational discussions which do not belong in the public sphere. The implication is clearly that as long as the individual is emotionally involved in an issue, he/she cannot come up with objective solutions that can be universally applied; consequently, private talk is banished from the public space. Of course, public talk is never disinterested; it represents the interests of those whose interests come to be defined as "public interest".

4. REIFICATION/NORMALIZATION:

This framing device refers to giving "permanence and a sense of tangibility to abstract ideology." (Patric Clair, 1991:119) It refers to the presentation of issues or narratives in a manner which suggests that 'this is just the way things are'. In the case of sexual harassment, according to Patric Clair, this framing can be used to

excuse the act by saying that it is 'biological' or 'natural' and that it cannot be stopped. (1993:120)

According to Patric Clair, framing devices are used not only by a dominant group in a society but also by the marginalized group which adapts the same frames to tell its stories. For example, in her study of women who were victims of sexual harassment, she found that when talking about their experience the women framed their narrative with the use of one or more of the above framing techniques.

In order to explain how and why this happens, Patric Clair refers back to Gramsci's conceptualization of hegemony. She says that Gramsci tells us that the way in which domination is exercised is not through brute force but by the dominant group gaining the consent of the dominated. She borrows Hall's definition of hegemony as a "process in which the dominant class both dominates and leads the people to accept subordination as norm" (1993:117). Patric Clair says that if we think of hegemony as a process which involves consent and participation of the subjugated in their subjugation we can then begin to realize how, for example, women have contributed to the construction of femininity. Using the concept of hegemony we are able to see how a subjugated

group can be looked at not as passive victims but as active participants, even in its own oppression. For example, instead of looking at femininity as something imposed on women by male-dominated society, we can look at how women perpetuate femininity by the way they act, speak or dress. In this approach minorities and women could be said to "have participated in the construction of the dominant discourse". (1993:118) What this approach does is that it represents social relations as much more complex and power as something more than simple brutal domination.

In the following chapter, I will demonstrate how framing devices are used in television to sequester certain stories, i.e., stories that are told on talk shows. These framing devices influence the content and meaning of these stories. "Like [a] frame around a picture....the frame is involved in the evaluation of the message...as such the frame is metacommunicative...it comments upon the discursive event." (Patric Clair, 1993:117) These frames are not value-free and neutral. They attach meaning to the images we see.

CHAPTER IV

THE USE OF FRAMING DEVICES IN TALK SHOW NARRATIVES

TEXTUAL ANALYSIS

In this chapter I will examine specific talk show texts and illustrate the relevance of Patric Clair's work on framing devices. I have selected 19 videotaped episodes of talk shows from 1995 to 1999 to analyze. I have also read the transcripts of five shows. They included episodes from *The Jerry Springer Show*, *Sally Jessy Raphael*, *Jenny Jones*, *Maury*, *Montel Williams* and *Ricki Lake*.

My textual analysis will focus on *The Jerry Springer Show*. I will use some examples from other shows such as *Sally Jessy Raphael*, but the main focus will be on *The Jerry Springer Show*. This is because it has been at the center of the debate about trash television. It is the most frequently mentioned and most often attacked show. It has become a symbol of bad taste, bizarre behavior in public space and the declining morality of America. In trash television, it is at the bottom of the trash heap. Nevertheless, all of the 'trash talk shows' use the same tactics; *The Jerry Springer Show* and *Ricki Lake* are not

that different from one another. Therefore, I felt that it would be most appropriate to examine *The Jerry Springer Show* since it attracts the most attention. The episodes I analyzed were randomly selected. Each episode was examined for the four framing devices drawn from Patric Clair's work.

1. TRIVIALIZATION

Trivialization, as defined by Patric Clair, is a process by which ideas, comments, and identities of an individual or a group are reduced to an object of ridicule or humor. In talk shows, trivialization can be observed in the way that the guests and the stories that they recount are ridiculed. In particular, there are three ways in which narratives on talk shows are trivialized.

In the first place, the construction of the narrative in talk shows is geared to amuse rather than inform. Because of this entertainment imperative, the narrative is constructed in a way which ridicules and makes fun of the guests and their stories. Secondly, the audience is encouraged to interject laughter, clapping and booing as the guests tell their stories. Finally, the host introduces

remarks and gestures within the overall narrative with the purpose of highlighting the amusement value of the story.

The *Jerry Springer Show* is a good example of a program which constructs narratives in a trivializing manner. For example, in a show which aired on January 2, 1997, and which was titled "I Have a Secret to Tell You," 'female' guests tell their boyfriends that they are actually males. The whole show is intentionally constructed as a set-up of the male partners, who are then faced with the prospect of being exposed as someone having had a sexual relationship with another male. Each of the recipients of the on-air surprise is introduced in a way that maximizes the surprise value of the narrative. Before the guest who is to be surprised walks onto the stage, Jerry and the other guests discuss the secret to be revealed. The audience is thus informed of the secret; the only person who is not privy to it is the person to be surprised.¹⁹ As the uninformed boyfriend comes on to the stage, Jerry sets him up by inquiring about the relationship. "How long have you been together?" "Are you serious about each other?" "Do you want to marry her?" The guest, unaware of what is to come, answers these leading questions in an innocent way. The

¹⁹ It is true that some of these guests know quite well what the "surprise" is and walk into the "set-up" well-informed. But, as the Jenny Jones murder case proved, some of these guests are ignorant of what the surprise that awaits them is.

audience, knowing what is to come, laughs and claps as the guest talks about his love for his "girlfriend". This whole opening process is created to entertain the audience and to promote confrontation upon which the talk show success rests. But what it also does is to reduce the narrative, which is supposed to be the guest's personal story, to a well-fabricated drama/comedy. When this kind of trivializing frame is used in the discussion of important issues such as rape, infidelity and wife abuse, it reduces these stories to an entertaining prank rather than serious and sometimes dangerous problems.

While one can argue that the *Jerry Springer* show's narrative construction represents an extreme form of trivialization, almost all of the 'trash talk shows' such as *Sally Jessy Raphael*, *Maury*, *The Jenny Jones Show*, *Montel Williams*, and *Ricki Lake* utilize the same tactics.

As discussed earlier, the studio audiences' participation is also critical to the trivialization process. The show uses the studio audience for this purpose by presenting the narrative in such way that the audience is led to expect something other than what is to come. Of course, having watched many talk shows, the audience may be well-versed in the genre's formula and participate in the process for amusement. The ultimate objective of this type

of trivialization is to amuse and shock the audience with the final revelation. The audience, then, reacts with laughter and boos.

In this kind of set-up, the host plays a key role by making sure that he/she doesn't use words that would tip off the audience about the final surprise. An example of this is seen in a *Jerry Springer* episode entitled "Rejected Lovers Get Revenge" (November 3, 1998) in which Springer introduces the subject as "lovers who want to confront the person who stole their lover". He introduces the first guest by saying "Please meet Lisa; she says her husband of three years left her for someone else and she refuses to accept it until she gets her revenge." Springer deliberately uses gender neutral language to set up the situation so that when the husband comes out in drag and introduces another man as his lover, the audience breaks into laughter and cheers. After the husband walks on the stage the camera cuts to Springer. He has an expression of shocked surprise on his face, and his hand rests upon his face in a pose that suggests that he too is shocked and bewildered by the turn of events. The audience rewards Springer for this entertaining turn of events by laughing, cheering, and chanting "Jerry, Jerry, Jerry" to show their appreciation.

The third way that the stories in these shows are trivialized is the host's own attitude towards the guests, which in most cases becomes the audiences' attitudes. As the above example illustrates, Springer many times uses poses and facial expressions to show his reaction to the stories told by his guests. At other times, he makes remarks and jokes to elicit reaction from the audience. For example, in "I have a Secret to Tell You" Jerry focuses on the shock values of transsexual/cross-dressing men and the men who sleep with them. He introduces one of the guests as being "really a man too" despite the way he is dressed. And when one of the other male guests, unable to tell who is male and who is female simply by looking at them, turns to Springer and asks, pointing to one of the other guests, "Is she too? She is, too, a transsexual?" He answers, tongue in cheek, "just bunch of guys hanging around." When one of the cross-dressers on the "Rejected Lovers Get Revenge" episode is attacked by his abandoned wife and he loses his wig and 'feminine' look in the scuffle, Springer quips, "The lesson here is we are all just one tack away from being a man". Throughout the shows, Springer is constantly making these kinds of derisive remarks. His studio audience usually reacts with an enthusiastic "Jerry, Jerry..."

Trivialization, then, is present in talk shows. It frames the stories we hear and see. The construction of the narrative, the laughter, booing, and cheering of the audience, as well as the host's comments, reactions, and gestures all work together to trivialize and limit the narrative. The narrative is framed as entertainment, as drama/comedy and not as serious debate or discussion. The frame tells us that these stories' primary merit is their entertainment value.

2. Denotative Hesitancy

The second framing device one finds in talk shows is denotative hesitancy. In Patric Clair's research, this framing device refers to the silence or inability of marginalized or dominated group to express their ideas and viewpoints, to articulate their experiences. Denotative hesitancy is about the control of institutional language by those with economic and social standing. It is about the privileging of the experiences and expressions of one group or individual over another.

In talk shows, this framing can be seen in the show titles, in the host's commentaries, in the host's definition of the issues and in the presence of the expert whose function is to articulate the

'real' issues that the guests are incapable of articulating themselves.

i. TITLES

One of the ways in which denotative hesitancy plays out in talk shows is in the way in which the titles of each episode attach labels to guests. Since most episodes tell the story of four or more guests, episode titles have to be broad enough to cover different but similar stories. Moreover, show titles are designed to capture the audience's interest so they have to be as tantalizing and controversial as possible. This means that sometimes the titles have nothing to do with the real topic of the show, nor do they have any relation to the guests' expressed views. For example, the above mentioned "Rejected Lovers Get Revenge" has absolutely nothing to do with revenge. The "rejected lovers" which the title refers to, get no revenge; rather, they are humiliated, insulted, and, at the end, left the way they were when they started - still in love with partners who have other people in their lives.

Likewise, the Springer episode titled "Love Against The Odds" (January 7, 1997) has nothing to do with love but is about a disabled woman and her ex-boyfriend fighting

about money and the custody of their child. It is not only the episode titles that frame the narratives these people tell. Many shows also insert captions that are supposed to inform us. These captions function as teasers in between segments. The captions used may apply fairly to some of the guests but some guests protest against them.

The labels are symbolically written right on the guests' bodies and become part of their on-screen identity. The guests do not have the power to remove them because in order to appear on the show they must accept the label attached to them - at least while appearing on the show.

ii. THE HOST

Another way denotative hesitancy is used to frame narrative on talk shows is through the presence and power of the host. We must remember that most talk shows are set up as a confrontational drama which is orchestrated by the host. The host not only constantly interrupts the guests, but also guides in the telling of their story. The host asks questions which move the story towards the dramatic tension needed to entertain. Sally Jessy Raphael is a master in this technique of leading guests through a process by which the story is revealed slowly and

dramatically. The consequence of this inquisition/revelation process is to tantalize and shock rather than inform audiences. Raphael uses certain phrases to make the guest say what she wants them to say without looking as though she is putting words into their mouths. She guides them through the narrative. She solicits the answers she seeks and rephrases and emphasizes the statements to which she wants to bring her audiences' attention. Of course, journalists often use this same method to get to the "truth," but what is different about talk shows is the claim made by the hosts of these shows that we are watching "regular" people telling their stories without intervention from anyone. In fact, what we are seeing is an incompatibility between guests who, for whatever reasons, wish to tell a personal story, and a television program which is seeking to attract and retain audiences by showcasing sensational stories. Sometimes the guests do tell their stories. But, most of the time, the commercial imperatives of these shows defeat the very purpose that their producers and hosts give for their existence.

When a talk show host controls how the guests tell their stories, the guests appear to be incapable of telling their own stories. Furthermore, when the host expresses

clearly and rationally what the guest struggles to say, it highlights the difference in class, education and 'reason' between guest and host. An example of this is seen on *The Jerry Springer Show*. One of Springer's ways of highlighting his guests' lack of civility and rationality is by interjecting some mundane comment or question at the time when they are at their highest level of anger and agitation -thus making their own lack of self control even more evident.

This can be seen in "Rejected Lovers Get Their Revenge". The sister of a young gay man whose wife is one of the 'rejected lovers' comes on stage and starts physically and verbally attacking her brother. Springer first watches the scene from among the audience. Then, as the woman's attack gets more violent, he walks up to her in a calm manner and in a low voice, which is in contrast to her high pitched screams, holds out his hand and says "hi". The audience laughs and starts chanting "Jerry,..." What this does is contrast his 'civilized' demeanor and manner of speaking with the crazed guest's violent behavior. This is, of course, no accident. Springer is a master at manipulating these situations in order to elicit a roar from his audience.

The host also 'speaks' for the guests by rephrasing what they say in mainstream English. This is important because as one producer put it, talk show guests are "{t}railer-park trash and ghetto kids." (Gamson, 1994:28). These people do not bring the same command of the English language as the host, the expert and other professionals on the show. As the guests tell their stories, the host interrupts and rephrases the main points, but he does so on his own terms, interjecting jokes, comments and using expressions which elicit certain reactions from the audience.

For example, in the episode "My Man Behaves Badly!" (November 26, 1996), an African American male guest, who is accused of leaving his partner for another woman is trying to tell his story. He is a black male from the inner city and his words and expressions reflect his background. He uses an inner-city dialect peppered with 'you know what I'm saying'. After the young man repeats this phrase a few times, Springer comments, "Ok, I know what you're saying" thus bringing attention to the young man's lack of 'educated English'. The audience laughs. After this little scene, the guest starts stuttering. He makes a few attempts to express himself, fails and then stops, saying that he is getting nervous. From that moment, every time he speaks,

the audience laughs. Finally, he remains silent, because the audience no longer pays attention to what he is saying but rather to how he is saying it. The guest is literally, silenced.

The Jerry Springer show also uses a segment called 'Final Thoughts' to editorialize and frame the narrative. This segment gives the host a forum to make a meta-commentary on the subject under discussion. After an hour of bleeps, boos, and other interruptions, Springer gets his own few minutes to express his point of view on the subject at hand. This gives him an opportunity to express his opinion without interruption, an opportunity that his guests never get. This segment is in stark contrast to the 'wild', 'crazy' ramblings of his guests. His rational, knowing voice brings sanity to an otherwise crazy circus. For example, in the "I am a Homeless Teen," (December 17, 1996) episode, Springer closes by saying that we should not pass judgment on the street kids because

for most of these kids they are not running from home, they are looking for a home. And what they got now as cold, and barren and unsettled and dangerous as it seems is the closest thing they have had to home and a family in a long time, if not ever. These kids don't need speeches about family values. Indeed they value family so much they will do anything and risk everything, anywhere and everywhere just to find one.

This speech is made after Jerry says goodbye to the audience and is recorded separately. Here, Jerry gives us his own analysis of the situation without the teens to interrupt or challenge him.

iii. THE EXPERT

Finally, the role of the expert on talk shows represents denotative hesitant framing. He/she is the possessor of officially-sanctioned, rational language. The expert explains what the problems of the guests "really" are. She/he takes control of the narrative; thus making the guest look like someone who cannot even understand and/or explain his/her own experience.

An example of this can be seen in a *Sally Jessy Raphael* episode titled "My Husband Thinks He is King of the Castle." (November 27, 1996) The episode focuses on women who are being abused by their partners. 'Relationship expert', Lynda Vito, tells the guests that what is really wrong with their marriages is that the women are not facing the reality of their situation. "These girls think they were visited by Cupid; they were visited by the stork. These guys are children, they really are," is her analysis of the situation in which women talk about being physically

and emotionally abused. She says that the problem is that the men see the women as property. She makes this pronouncement after almost an hour of women telling us that their husbands expect them to wait on them hands and foot and to refer to them in all aspects of their lives.

Experts like Ms. Vito are brought on to express in few seconds and in quasi-official language what the guests have been saying for the first 55 minutes of the show. Their role is to give legitimacy to the discussion and a semblance of resolution to the issues raised in the show. But they also serve a more hegemonic role. They recuperate the whole discourse into the accepted and official domain. After an hour of a 'circus', the expert brings back sanity. He/she reaffirms that there is indeed order in the world and it can be achieved through the intervention of official authority.

In "My Husband Thinks He is the King of Castle", Ms. Vito forcefully claims that the problem lies with the women themselves because they don't take action but just sit and suffer. After hearing their repeated, "I have to do this for my husband", she tells them, "if you don't want to, you don't". Rhonda, one of the women, responds, "You can say all of this and everything but you don't live with them." To which the expert answers, "You live with him. You have a

choice." Rhonda responds, "You don't have five kids to raise." The expert then goes into a long monologue on how there are many women's groups that Rhonda can join. Rhonda starts crying furiously. She mumbles that she is not even allowed to go out alone. The expert does not respond to what Rhonda is saying. She continues to speak about the many solutions available and how the women could cope if only they tried. Ms. Vito closes by saying, "Take the five kids, pack them up, and get them out of the house." By this time Rhonda is so frustrated that she simply gives up.

It is here that we see how the framing of talk show narrative effectively silences those whom it is touted to help. The expert's function is to bring 'closure' to the narratives. She must dispense predetermined solutions because the tight schedule of the talk show does not allow for detailed examination of issues. The answer to Rhonda's problem might indeed be that she should leave her husband; the problem is that in this episode no one really listens to her story. The conclusion that she should leave is easily suggested but, how and to where is not discussed. As we see in this episode, women are constantly asked "why don't you leave". Their answer is 'I can't'. What is needed is detailed, planned help which provides answers to some of the questions which Rhonda poses.

Guests like Rhonda seek solutions to extremely personal and particular problems which, while similar to others, need to be examined in their particular context. They also face problems which are socially located and which need to be examined in relation to social values, beliefs and practices that contribute and perpetuate them. Talk shows fail to do that.

As matter of fact, in many instances, the talk show expert is a performer and his/her focus is in the rapport formed with audiences whose favorable reaction guarantees a return engagement.²⁰

Sometimes the expert comes with a scientific test which, he/she argues, tells the truth of the matter despite the guests' claims. Some times the expert comes armed with scientific tests which lend credence to his/her claims. In a Maury episode titled "If You're Cheating...I will Find Out" (December, 13,1999), for example, husbands who are accused of cheating claim that they are not cheating, but the expert says that he and the polygraph are correct and that the husbands are cheating.

The irony in the use of experts in talk shows lies in the fact that a genre which claims to allow the average

²⁰ In cases like the one discussed above, it would seem that the expert would seek to form a rapport with the victims such as Rhonda whom she seeks to help, but, in reality, the show is constructed so that in most cases the expert 'performs' for the audience, watching their reaction rather than the reaction of the guests.

individual to speak in his or her own voice has to resort to consultations with experts to make sense of the stories told by the guests.

3. PRIVATE/PUBLIC DICHOTOMY

The public/ private framing device, as defined by Patric Clair, means framing some narratives as private and not belonging in the public arena and others as being of public concern. This dichotomy removes certain speech and/or issues from the public domain into the private. In doing so, it delimits issues that are framed private because it says that those issues should be the concern of private individuals rather than of public authority or society as a whole. As well, it downplays the institutional/systemic roots of issues that are framed as only private.

In talk shows, this framing device can be seen in the way in which talk shows present the topics under discussion. The topics are not presented as social issues but rather as private matters. They are viewed as individual problems. Rape, infidelity, poverty, spousal and child abuse and racism are framed as individual rather than social problems and solutions are sought at the individual

rather than societal level. Even if one of the guests or member of the studio audience tries to bring up the social constraints that act upon individual choices, the host leads the discussions back to the personal level.

This individualization of issues is achieved by the use of personal pronouns in the topic titles, by assigning blame solely to individuals, and by minimizing the social roots of the problems, thus preventing any potential solidarity on the basis of shared experiences.²¹

i. USE OF PERSONAL PRONOUNS

One of the ways in which the public/private dichotomy manifests itself in talk shows is through the use of personal pronouns. The use of personal pronouns in the titles of talk shows individualizes social issues by reducing them to personal problems. Talk shows are about the experiences of private individuals. They do not deal with the wider social implication of the issues that they present. This is because talk shows are, above everything else, entertainment. At the very core of the talk show narrative structure is the behavior of the individual,

²¹ Of course, one could argue that one could say the same thing about any show on TV. I argue that talk shows are different because they are built on the premises that ordinary people can tell their stories.

stripped of all his/her social implications, social roots, and social role. The confrontation and humiliation of the individual guest is the entertainment. Therefore, stories on talk shows are framed as personal stories even when these stories are social in nature, such as spousal and child abuse stories.

The individualization of the narrative is achieved through the use of many different tactics which emphasize the very personal nature of what is to be discussed. For example, show titles are personalized. Even though each episode has multiple guests most of the titles are singular such as, "I am Married to a Man", "I am in love with a Drag Queen", "My Man Behaves Badly" "I am in Love With a Serial Killer", and "I am a Homeless Teen". These titles mark the narrative as a titillating exposure of private misconduct rather than the discussion of social ills. The personal and possessive pronouns tell us that it is one individual's personal story.

The stories are personalized in another way. The discussion is presented as gossip or a personal exchange between two close friends. The host addresses the guests by their first name, thus removing any formality. As well, hosts are called by their first name. They are Oprah,

Jerry, and Sally. This creates an atmosphere of familiarity which gives the whole discussion an air of interpersonal rather than public exchange. It moves the discussion from the formal public sphere to that of familial domestic atmosphere.

This personal framing of these discussions subsumes social issues under discussions of individual shortcomings. It allows talk shows to present social issues (such as such as rape, spousal abuse, poverty, racism and child abuse) without confronting the role that social mores, values and beliefs play in the prevalence and perpetuation of these problems.

ii. BLAMING THE VICTIM

The second way that the public/private framing device is utilized is in assigning blame to the guests on the show for the problems they face. In presenting stories, talk shows frame each individual guest's story as being due to unique failings on his/her part. The talk show host, audience, or even other guests take the role of his/her interrogator, father confessor and, finally, savior. The

show is constructed so that we stand in judgment of a guest who must be made to confess his/her transgressions.²²

This individualization of narratives gives us the liberty of distancing ourselves from the issues under discussion. It also allows us to distance ourselves from the guest. We can convince ourselves that the individual is in such a situation because they have behaved in a way that is wrong. They alone are responsible. This is their problem. So when a spouse is abused, it is because she does not want to escape the abuse or because the abusive partner is just a bad person. When a woman turns to prostitution because her welfare cheque has been cut, her husband does not pay child support and minimum wage will not feed her kids, she is attacked as a "sexual deviant". All problems are personal. There is, at the most, a token examination of the role that social structures play in these situations. Rather than looking at the social roots that foster 'deviant' behaviors, talk shows place blame solely on the individual.

²² This does not mean that all the guests have secrets to reveal. Many times other guests are there to hear the secret or to force the person to reveal the secret, but the technique is that of inquisition/resolution.

iii. SEXISM AND WIFE ABUSE AS A PERSONAL PROBLEM

Talk shows frame wife abuse and sexism as solely personal actions. They look for both the problem and its solutions in the individuals who are involved. They fail to locate these issues historically and contextually. In the "My Husband Thinks He is King of the Castle" episode of *Sally Jessy Raphael*, a female guest named Michelle recounts the abuses she suffers at the hand of her fiancée. The title placed on her on the screen reads: "Says her fiancée Matthew makes her act as his remote control". "We don't have a remote control at home, so he expects me to go up to the TV during the commercials and turn the TV for him, away from the commercial... He will sit and watch a show for five or ten minutes and he will go like that (she signals with her fingers) for me to switch the channel," she tells the audience. While she speaks, her fiancée is not yet on stage but is listening to her story, and is shown in a split screen. He laughs and smiles as she tells her story. He shows us the signals he uses to order her to perform different tasks as she describes them. The audience finds this whole situation funny. With each description, the audience laughs and cheers. After she describes how she had

to stand by the television and change channels until she found something he liked and gave her permission to sit down, one member of the audience yells, "Why do you do it?" The fiancée signals the answer by flashing the universal sign for money. But the show does not deal with this aspect of the situation. It does not look at the complex issue of women's dependence on husbands' salary. It does not deal with the economic reality that forces women to stay in abusive relationships because they are afraid they will not be able to provide for their children. What this interchange shows is that talk shows present a complex and multi-faceted issue in an over-simplified manner. The talk show format deals with wife abuse as a personal issue between spouses. This makes it easy for the show to assign blame and reach an easy 'closure'.

Even when it is obvious that the individuals involved are influenced by socially constructed gender roles, the talk show sticks to the personal/private approach. For example, we find out that one of the main reasons Matthew abuses Michelle is because she is not a "good housekeeper" which is, according to him, the main role of a woman in the household. We also find out that Matthew believes that a man who doesn't 'control' his wife is not a man. These are not new ideas. They are as old as time. But in the show

they are not put into a wider context. Their social roots and prevalence are not examined.

To maintain the personal discussion, the hosts gear the discussions towards blaming the victim by asking questions that paint the guests as being solely responsible for their suffering. The host does this because she/he needs to heighten the suspense by personalizing the situations and pitting the guests against each other. Furthermore, the host needs to get the studio audience excited and involved in the narrative. She/he wants them taking sides. All of this is achieved by interrogating the guests and by highlighting their personal role in the situation. A 'rational', impersonal debate will not produce the kind of entertainment talk shows promise to deliver.

For example, Sally asks Michelle, "You are a good housekeeper, right?" This is a set-up because Sally already knows that Matthew claims that the reason he abuses Michelle is because she is not a good housekeeper. The question puts Michelle on the defensive. The tension in her nervous "no" tells us that this is not only a source of tension in her family life, but that she feels guilt and shame. " But I try to be," she adds defensively.

Sally: "Is it very important to him that it (the home) is spotless at all times?"

Michelle: "Yeah"

Sally: "What does this mean to you?" (Sally snaps her fingers)

Michelle: "It means that I need to go and find out what he needs".

Sally: "Now, he is very particular about his shoes. He doesn't like to wear his shoes all the time in the house?"

Michelle: "I have to unlace his shoes in a certain way... They can't be unlaced too much. I have to take off his boots and take both pairs of socks off and scratch his feet since I have nails."

This whole process puts the victim under interrogation while her abuser is shown in the split screen smiling and enjoying her embarrassment. When he joins his fiancée' on the stage, he proudly strides in and claims that he is the king. Since the man does not seem to care what the audience thinks of him and seems to be enjoying himself, the woman ends up being put on the spot for staying in what is obviously a dysfunctional and abusive relationship. The studio audience, host and the expert all tell the women to leave, but they do so in a way which does not take into consideration the complexity of the situation. As well, even though it is obvious that the abuse goes deeper than changing channels, this is what is entertaining on

television and this is what gets focused on. Physical abuse is not brought into the discussion by the host because it is too serious and can bring criminal charges against the men. When physical abuse is discussed, it is the guests who bring it up but the host simply lets it pass rather than confront and bring it out into the open.

While the women are interrogated and questioned about their lives, the men on stage in this episode are seen as just being bad men. The women are treated harshly because Sally Jessy Raphael, the expert, and the studio audience all feel that the women can simply change the situation by leaving.

Yet, a major thread in all the women's stories is that they are housewives with no independent means to provide for their children. The major fear they express is that their children would suffer if they left their abusive spouses. Furthermore, many women express fear about what their spouses would do if they were to leave them. They also say that they are watched very closely and all the families' finances are controlled by the husbands. All of these points raised by the women are valid. They are obstacles faced by millions of other women who are in abusive relationships. But the show does not deal with these issues.

The laughs, the cheers and the constant 'Why don't you leave?' reduce the women's stories to personal failures. Of course, these stories are partially about personal choices. Some of the women may be able to pack and leave. But domestic violence is also a social issue. The social values and beliefs in which these guests are raised play a role in both the abusers' actions and the victims' reactions. Because of the way they frame narratives, talk shows treat issues such as domestic violence as personal failings at the level of the abuser and the abused. They present the guests, whether victim or victimizer, as freaks who are being exposed for their deviation from 'normal' behavior. But we know that spousal abuse is no anomaly. Matthew's claim that "When he whistles his fiancée Michelle should come running," and his belief that he is the king because he controls the money is shared by many others. At one point in the show, Matthew turns to a woman in the audience and tells her that she needs a man, to which she answers "I have a man" and he responds "you ain't got a real man...you got a spineless jellyfish, that is what you got." To him, any man who doesn't control and abuse his wife is not a 'man' but a "jellyfish".

The studio audience attacks guests like Matthew. They call him names and the men in the audience tell him that he

is not a real man. They claim that they would never treat a woman the way he treats his fiancée, that he is a pig, a weak man. One could argue that this at least isolates and humiliates him. But it also minimizes the prevalence of women's oppression in society. It makes the men's actions seem like an apparition which no 'normal' person would engage in, when in fact domestic violence is more than the isolated actions of bizarre men. It takes place behind the closed doors of many 'normal' homes.

The studio audience also attacks women like Michelle. Individual audience members tell her that they would never take the abuse that she takes and that she should pack up and leave. But leaving is not easy. Abused women cannot simply pack and leave. In fact sometimes that is the worst thing they can do because statistics show that there is a correlation between women who leave abusive relationships and homicides later committed by spouses. There is no question that abused women and men should leave the abusive relationships. But they need help and they need to understand that theirs is not the only such case and that others have been in similar situations and have been able to leave.

Blaming the individual simplifies things for those who produce these shows because they can claim resolution,

which would have been harder to achieve if the complexity of the issue were probed. By not focusing on the wider social structures that perpetuate these abuses and by ignoring the shared experiences of the women and the strength in it, these show fail to provide answers which could lead to practical solutions for the guests. Subsequently, they leave the women on the panel, as well as those who are watching at home, without offering them any real solutions to their problems.

iv. RACISM AS A PERSONAL ISSUE

The public/private dichotomy can also be seen in the way in which racism²³ is handled on talk shows. First it must be stated that talk shows do not, in most cases, explicitly deal with the subject of racism or the role it plays in social relations. When they do tackle the subject, these shows focus on racism as having individual rather than social causes. They frame "racism as an individual psychological dysfunction," writes Janice Peck (1994:103-104). They explain differences between people of

²³ Janice Peck studied 13 episodes of The Oprah Winfrey Show which were in a series of shows called "Racism in 1992". This series which was created specifically to look at this issues, according to Peck, still dealt with racism at the personal and psychological level. "Winfrey is expected to frame the 'topic' of racism in terms of its emotional, interpersonal dimensions, thereby, reducing potential for political conflict." (Peck, 1995:91)

different races as being due to psychological differences between individuals, rather than between races.

One of the ways in which talk shows deal with racism is by interviewing guests from extremist groups such as the Klu Klux Klan. This is a strategic way of dealing with this explosive subject because it again allows the talk show to individualize the subject and to demonize extremist individuals without examining systemic racism in mainstream America.

The personalization of racism in talk shows can be seen in the titles of talk shows dealing with this subject. "I am a Teenage Racist", "A Racist Family", "A KKK Family", "Why Are You A Racist" and "KKK Moms" are some of the titles of *The Jerry Springer Show* episodes dealing with racism.

Since talk shows are about looking at individual misconduct, episodes dealing with racism focus on changing individual behaviors. When individuals profess to racist beliefs and actions, the shows seeks to transform these individuals' attitudes without dealing with the underlying socially prevalent prejudices.

This pattern is seen in an episode of *Springer* titled "A Racist Family" (February 20, 1995). In this episode Springer is interviewing a racist family. The father

claims that he is a proud racist and that he is raising his children as racists. Springer seems to be shocked by this man's ideas. In discussing the man's racism, Springer is quick to point out that this man does not represent mainstream America, that he is a hateful man whom all Americans despise. He attacks the man by reminding him that, in America, people do not raise their children as racists. "We do not raise children to hate and that is what you are doing," he exclaims. This attack upon racism is commendable, but it is a superficial one. In attacking Mr. Kreis, Springer simplifies the type and nature of racism which exists in America. He creates a division between normal Americans who do not hate and the crazy ones who do. But by dealing with racism as a personal problem rather than a social disease, talk shows downplay the prevalence of racism in America. Men like Kreis are laughed at and ridiculed but their actions are no joking matter. Moreover, when racism is treated only as the ramblings of crazy extremists like Mr. Kreis, its entrenched nature in the very fabric of American social, political and economic life is overlooked. What is destructive about racism is not so much the Klan which is extremist and is easily discredited but the racism one faces in one's school and one's job. The most destructive

kind of racism is the kind which millions of minorities face everyday in 'normal' surroundings. This is what talk shows fail to examine.

v. POVERTY AS A PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY

Poverty and the strain it puts on personal relations is one of the major subplots in talk show narratives. Many of the guests discuss how poverty or lack of financial resources have contributed to the situation in which they find themselves. However, the shows, instead of looking at both the personal responsibility of holding a job, and providing for one's family and the structural constraints that working families face, approach the subject as a private failure which can be rectified by changes in the conduct of the individual.

This is clearly the case in the *Springer* episode entitled "I am a Homeless Teen". Homeless teens appear on *Springer* to discuss their daily struggles. They want to show what it is like to be a homeless teen and how difficult their lives are. But *Springer* is interested in approaching the issue as an entertaining glance into the strange lives of these teens. *Springer* introduces the episode by saying "Here is how they squat in LA". This is

followed by clips of kids discussing what it is like to prostitute themselves for food, to be raped, and to live in squalor. He asks the kids to "explain a day" of their lives to him.

Sheryl, one of the teens answers: "There are a lot of restaurants there {in Santa Monica, California}. It is really a yuppie place to hang out, so the people come by with the leftover plates, so we just ask them for leftovers."

"Sheryl, you know life is supposed to be better than that, no? Why do you accept this? " Springer inquires and the audience applauds.

Springer: "How do you get money to live?"

Sheryl: "I spare change" (beg).

Springer: "I am gonna be the mean guy right now. Let's say you are asking for change in the street, and I know there has gotta be people coming up to you, looking at the both of you- young, healthy, intelligent- and you say, "You got some spare change". There has gotta be some guy that looks at you and says, "Hey, you know what, go and get yourself a job, work for something and then you will have some money". The audience gives him a rousing applause. Springer wants to take a break, after he makes this statement, but Tannim wants to respond to Jerry's comments.

"If someone said that to me, I'd say, go ahead, give me a job because you know what, I don't have an address. I don't take a shower every morning. I don't have laundry to clean my clothes everyday. How the hell am I supposed to get a job? There is no help out there for us."

Tannim raises an important point about the lack of opportunities faced by homeless teenagers. But Jerry simply promises to discuss Tannim's point in the next segment, which he doesn't do. Instead, he moves on to new guests.

Another homeless guest, Gina, who has one child and is expecting another, talks about what her life is like on the streets. "Life is terrible because I don't know where my next meal is coming from; I don't know where I am staying." Again, this teenager brings up the lack of resources and opportunities faced by these teens. But Springer does not want to look at the wider issues.

The problem is that talk shows focus only on the personal and ignore the social responsibility and constraints. Actually, as far as Springer is concerned, if "Scrappy", Gina's boyfriend, really wanted to feed and house his family, he could. Springer tells the teens that they should not have children if they could not provide for them. Scrappy answers, "I am trying to get a job. But you try to get a job with no address, you try to get a job

without having a shower and you smell." Springer doesn't believe that this is a valid reason. He says that if his family were in the same situation, he would somehow find a way out. The audience gives him a cheering ovation.

Scrappy persists. He tries to explain how difficult it is to find a job when you are homeless. He struggles to get his point made above the loud cheers and clapping that follows Springer's comments. "All right Jerry, put it like this, put it like this. I have found a place to take a shower, but I don't have an address. When you go and have a job interview they ask you where you live. You say, well, I live on the street. Automatically they judge you." "No job" adds Tannim in support of Scrappy's point. "You don't have no house. You don't have no address..." Jerry interrupts here. He suggests that Scrappy could use a friend's address to get a job. "You have no friends on the street," is Scrappy's answer

This exchange ends with Springer repeating that, as far as he is concerned, if Scrappy could con people into giving him money in the streets, he could also con them into giving him a job if he wanted to. Scrappy answers by saying, "All you people judge us. I had a job, I was doing kitchen interior work. I fell off a two story A-Frame house and busted my back. All I know how to do is

construction work. All my life I have done construction work. I had to quit." Springer never picks up this challenge to his assumptions about Scrappy's willingness to work and the reasons why he is not working. Instead he moves on to the next guest, again, avoiding any meaningful discussion of the complexity of the reasons these kids are on the street.

In these exchanges, Springer turns poverty into solely a personal responsibility. He does not consider the social, cultural and/economic reasons that drive these teens into the streets. Despite the efforts of the homeless teenagers to introduce into the discussions constraints they face in their attempts to rebuild their lives, Springer blames them for their plight. He isolates each homeless teen by saying, "You and you alone are responsible". According to him, any normal person would find a way to find a job and provide for his/her family if they really wanted to do so. The audience agrees with him.

Talk shows, then, frame the stories they depict as private stories. They focus on individual choices and responsibilities and fail to look at the social forces that influence and constrain these individual choices. Their focus is "human behavior" and not "class and race

divisions" (Shattuc, 1997:102). In taking this approach, they fail to put the stories in their proper context.

4 Reification/Normalization

Reification is the process by which socially constructed identities and assumptions are made to seem natural. Reification takes place when individuals or groups are depicted in ways which normalize them. An example of normalization might be saying that it is normal for black males to be violent or sexually overactive, or unfaithful.

As mentioned above, talk shows individualize social problems and present them as being rooted in personal and private actions. At the same time, they rely on age-old stereotypes in their selection of guests and subject material. To demonstrate how talk shows reify stereotypical images, I will look at how talk shows depict African American males and females.

i. THE SEXUALLY VIRILE AFRICAN AMERICAN MALE

One of oldest images in the American cultural tradition is that of the over-sexed black/Latino male who

hungers after women, especially white women. The sexually virile, intellectually challenged, unclean African American male who desires and threatens the pure, innocent, white maiden has always been an easily accessible and often-used cultural icon. In his book, *Race Matters* (1993), Cornel West writes that in a nation where sex is a national obsession, black bodies and black sexuality have always incited fear in the hearts of white America.

There is Bigger Thomas (the mad and mean predatory craver of white women), Jack Johnson, (the super performer- be it in athletics, entertainment, or sex- who excels others naturally and prefers women of a lighter hue). (West, 1993:83).

These figures represent, according to West,

"distorted, dehumanized, creatures whose bodies-color of skin, shape of nose and lips, type of hair, size of hips- are already distinguished from the white norm of beauty and whose feared sexual activities are deemed disgusting, dirty, or funky and considered less acceptable" (West, 1993:83).

While there are few 'pure' women depicted on talk shows, the threatening, illiterate, sexually over-active African-American male image is frequently found in talk shows. Young black and Latino males are depicted as promiscuous and socially irresponsible fathers who copulate without discrimination and reproduce without a thought as to who will care for the children.

While each man and his story is individualized, the barrage of these images on talk shows reproduce stereotypical and racist views. As Jane Shattuc writes, "they 'naturalize' racial and national distinctions in their morality play of good versus bad." (1997:101)

In one week of Springer, three of the episodes focused mostly on cheating. An example of this kind of representation is seen on a Springer episode titled "My Man Behaves Badly!" (November 26, 1996) Dalia, a white female, says that her "man" of seven years has left her for another woman. He left her with three kids for a sixteen year-old little "girl". In talking of her "man", Dalia says that he "has nothing up here" pointing to her temples, meaning that he has no brains, but everything down here, pointing to the genitals.

In "My Man is a Cheater" (December 16, 1996) the first guest "Okpara" is described as a someone who "cheated on his girlfriend Janet with Kim." While Okpara sits silently, the two women who are seated on either side of him, fight and hurl insults at each other. Okpara proudly admits to having had an affair with a third woman. These are a reproduction of the long accepted stereotype of the sexually virile but stupid black male, reincarnated on talk shows.

Linked to the myth of sexual prowess and promiscuity is the myth of the young black criminal. In the shows, many young African-American male guests could not take care of their children because they have been in jail. In the "My Man behaves Badly", "I am Taking Back My Man", and "I am on the Verge of Divorce" episodes, African American male guests admit that they have been recently released from jail. But the talk show does not deal with the effect of the high rate of African American male incarceration; it does not deal with the breakdown of the family in urban America.

Of course, talk shows do not portray only black male as cheaters. Because so many of the shows are about infidelity, almost every group is represented. What makes the case of the African American males specially unique, is its linkage to a history of prejudice and stereotyping.

Talk shows do more than just reproduce these stereotypes. Talk shows solidify them by linking them to 'real' experiences and 'real' individuals. In the talk show version of these stereotypical images, we hear it from the 'horse's mouth'. These people admit to multiple sexual partners and multiple children whom they are incapable of taking care of.

ii. A WOMAN'S PLACE IS...

Talk shows generally reproduce traditional stereotypes about women. They present women as enticing whores, and nagging housewives. Women are either good mothers or bad mothers, good housewives or bad ones. Even though, originally, talk shows such as *Donahue*, *The Oprah Winfrey Show* and *Sally Jessy Raphael* adopted the language of the women's movement by focusing on self-actualization and issues that are seen to be women's issues, talk shows still idealize traditional roles for women such as mother and housewife.

There are differences in how women are treated in shows like *The Jerry Springer Show* and *Sally Jessy Raphael*. *The Jerry Springer Show* specializes in sexual conflicts and infidelity while *Sally Jessy Raphael's* area of expertise is in family conflict, especially youth delinquency. Yet, both of these shows reproduce stereotypical images of women's role.

For example, *Sally Jessy Raphael* focuses on family conflicts, especially those that concern adolescent/teen rebellion. But most of the parents who come to complain about the children's behavior, and who are usually seen to be failing as parents, are women. Rarely, does Raphael

bring a father to answer for his child's behavior. This reinforces the belief that it is the mother's job to take care of the children.

In *The Jerry Springer Show*, many times women are presented to be fighting over a man who is just sitting there and watching, while the women tear each other's hair out. The man is caught between two fighting and screaming women whose conflict concludes in a 'cat-fight'. The women many times call each other 'bitches' and blame each other rather than the men. The show constructs the narrative so that the highlight is an old-fashioned 'cat fight' between the women. Women are presented as aggressive, loud, and out of control while the males are caught between.

Talk shows normalize old stereotypes in their selection of guests and the topic. They depend on easily accessible images of women, minorities, and other marginalized groups to create entertainment. The over-sexed black male, the incestuous white-trash, the sexually desirable beautiful young woman who sells her body for money, and the two women fighting over a man are all part of the images that are available in the American cultural imagery. Talk shows solidify and naturalize these stereotypes.

WHERE IS RESISTANCE?

As we have discussed above, talk shows frame the narratives they present in a certain way. These frames are not absolute, and the audience and the guests themselves sometimes expand and even break them. In this section I will present ways in which the guests on talk shows can rupture or change the above frames.

One way in which guests can challenge the frame is by bringing new and unanticipated elements into the discussion. An example, of this can be seen in the Sally Jessy Raphael episode "My Husband Thinks..." Rhonda, one of the guests, tells the expert that she cannot understand her suffering because she has not been in her position. Rhonda challenges the expert's claim to knowledge. She brings the complexity of the problem into the open and takes it further than the expert and the host are willing to take it. In this instance, she at least challenges the denotative hesitancy frame by speaking for herself, by attempting to take control of her experience and by challenging the expert's claim of authority and control.

The second way in which the framing can be ruptured is when the guests start supporting each other and linking

their stories, thereby challenging the public/private frame. This can be seen in both Sally Jessy Raphael's "My Husband Thinks..." and Springer's "I am a Homeless Teen". In both of these episodes, the guests who share experiences challenge the private/public frame by linking their stories and by supporting each other and forming a solidarity. This is done by encouraging each other and by affirming each other's experiences. For example, the other women on the panel with Rhonda support her because they share her experience. When she asks how the expert can tell her to escape when she can't even get out of the house, one of the other guests expresses her support by saying "not without his say, she can't." Hearing this comment, one begins to realize that the other women share and understand her pain. They know how difficult it is to leave, because they have been there themselves. The women extend this support to each other. Sometimes, women who are themselves victims of their own husband's abuse stand up to defend other women in the panel. A similar thing happens in "I am a Homeless Teen". One of the teens asks the expert how he can know her situation. She challenges his claim to knowledge. In both of these cases the guests take a stand against the expert. They speak for themselves despite the presence of the expert and the frames. What the guests do is actually claim

ownership of the narrative by introducing elements of the story that the expert and the host are not willing or able to introduce.

A third way in which the framing can be broken is through the studio audience. A frame can be destabilized by the studio audience's refusal to play their scripted role. Normally, the host sets the tone for the audience's reactions and the audience follows the host's lead by supporting the guests the host supports and by displaying the expected reactions such as laughter, cheering and booing as indicated by cues from the host. In an episode of the now cancelled *Geraldo* titled "Did This Woman Have Bill Cosby's Baby" (April 14, 1997) which dealt with a paternity case brought against Bill Cosby, the host's sympathy for the famous actor was very obvious. The story was to be framed as a gold-digging woman who is seeking to take advantage of the kindness of a man who has already given much to her and her daughter. *Geraldo* invited another man who claimed to be the child's real father. In most cases, the audience follows the host's lead. But in this case the audience sided with the woman. This was very powerful because *Geraldo*'s attack on the woman loses its power when the audience refuses to applaud or acknowledge it. In this

case, there was a clear case of rupture of the frame, because the audience sympathized with the woman.

Finally, resistance can lie in the very appearance of these groups on television. In "Freaks Talk Back", Joshua Gamson(1998) argues that the appearance of marginalized and silenced groups on television is in itself a resistance project because it creates an in-your-face kind of attitude which allows these people to claim a space even if that is on *The Jerry Springer Show*.

In this chapter, I discussed how the framing devices described by Patric Clair can be applied to the analysis of talk shows. I discussed the various ways in which talk shows frame narratives. I have presented trivialization, denotative hesitancy, public/private and normalization/reification as frames which can be said to exist in talk show narratives. I have also presented ways in which resistance can take place and counter these framings.

CONCLUSION

Trash television, and especially the talk show, has engendered a great deal of self-examination and debate in American society. Much of that debate arises from a fear of the threat posed by these shows to the American moral fabric. Underlying the public debate is a deep-seated fear that the inmates have taken control of the asylum.

A review of the literature on this subject since the mid-1990s, shows that there have been many changes in the talk show arena. Talk shows such as *The Jerry Springer Show* and *Ricki Lake* have gotten more and more controversial and sensationalistic. They have lost any pretense of being a public forum where serious issues are discussed. Springer now claims that his show is 'outrageous' and that he does not take anything on his show seriously. The *Oprah Winfrey Show*, on the other hand, has gone completely soft and mainstream, concentrating on self-actualization and self-improvement. As well, the controversy about talk shows has led to a decrease in the number of new talk shows being introduced. Other reality based programs, especially Court TV, have taken the place of talk shows in the television line-up.

The academic and popular debates about trash television continue. The fear about talk shows has not completely disappeared. This was clear during the Monica Lewinsky scandal when 'respected' news anchors such as Dan Rather were seen struggling with discussions of president Clinton's sexual escapades. At that moment, many felt that the fear that trash talk shows will bring down all television to their level was being realized.

The debate on talk shows brings together two contradictory and sometimes conflicting values in American public life. On the one hand, talk shows are the product of the American capitalist system. They are created in a free market where demand and supply determine what is to be produced. This capitalist ethos is usually fiercely protected by the American political right, who present the defense of the free-market mechanism as the center of their political agenda. On the other hand, talk shows bring into the public space people and subjects which have been hitherto barred from public forums. They parade in public the very ideas and actions which the political right promises to eradicate or at least control. Unwed mothers, strippers, transsexuals and gangbangers are not, usually, registered Republicans. It should be noted that many of the organizations which supported the *Empower American* efforts

were conservative organizations. *Empower America* codirector William Bennett was also a fellow at the *Heritage Foundation*, an organization which is associated with right-wing activism.

Talk shows offer a forum to people whose actions and opinions are seen as marginal. They also, on the surface, allow open discussions of the issues presented. Because of the attacks from the political right, and because their guests and subject matter are seen to be from the margins, talk shows are sometimes defended as representing a useful challenge to hegemony.

In this thesis, I have argued that talk shows emerged from economic imperatives which were the result of changes in the telecommunications industry. Their minimum cost and adaptability appealed to syndicators, broadcasters, and advertisers.

From the beginning, talk show hosts, producers and syndicators adopted the language of the oppressed. They presented themselves as defenders of those ignored by the mainstream media. They claimed to give voice to the masses and to allow people a forum to discuss issues which were important to them.

Initially, talk shows such as *Donahue*, *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, *Sally Jessy Raphael* and *Geraldo*, which were

the pioneers of this format, remained somewhat committed to social activism while also engaging in sensationalism to attract advertising revenues. While these older shows were seen as somewhat controversial by 1980s standards, they still directed some focus to issues that were considered to be important to disfranchised groups such as women and minorities.

The popularity of talk shows and the impressive revenues realized by syndication companies such as *Multimedia* and *King World*, attracted many companies to attempt to create the next *Donahue*. This created a saturated market. Many of the newer shows had a hard time competing with the older shows which were already established. Some producers recognized that one way that they could compete was by introducing new elements to the talk show format. Shows like *Ricki Lake*, *The Jerry Springer Show* and *Jenny Jones* found a niche by introducing a more controversial and confrontational style which came to be known as trash talk.

The growth of talk shows increased the amount of attention paid to them by both academic writers and popular magazines and newspapers. Because of their controversial nature, talk shows created a fierce debate in which many

either condemned them for being exploitative or praised them for opening up the public sphere to the marginalized.

In this thesis, I argued that talk shows should neither be easily disregarded as being just another form of exploitation nor should they be celebrated as representing a new kind of public sphere. Rather, they can be looked at as an arena which, while seeming to offer open access, actually frames and limits the narratives presented. Furthermore, talk shows offer us an opportunity to examine the ways in which public forums which seem to be open and inclusive can, in fact, be exclusionary and elitist.

Patric Clair, in her research on sexual harassment in the workplace, found that the use of framing devices segregates sexual harassment from other organizational narratives. The women who are victims feel compelled to find other explanations for the harassers' actions. The victim looks inwards by blaming herself, or she excuses the actions of the harasser by saying that she misunderstood, or she adopts the organizational language by saying that she must not do anything that would harm the company. The women's stories are sequestered. They are not given the same legitimacy as other stories within the organization.

I argued that talk shows can be said to deal with the topics they present in a similar way. The subject is framed

in a way which makes it trivial entertainment. The stories on talk shows are not given the same legitimacy as other stories on television, such as the news. They are framed as personal. As well, the guests are not allowed to speak freely but are led and guided by the host whose objective is to entertain the audience.

Talk shows are about money. To make money they need to entertain and, in order to achieve this, they present subjects that are complex, difficult and sometimes divisive such as rape, infidelity, racism, sexual difference, and family violence as personal issues. They are able to do this through the use of framing devices which allow them to discuss these issues in a non-threatening manner. Talk shows frame stories that would, under a different framing, have led to self-examination on the part of the American public and perhaps to both institutional and personal transformation.

One may argue that there is only one way to discuss the kind of stories brought by these guests, because these stories are about sex, deviance and abnormal behavior. Many of these stories are about sex in its many forms, but sex can be seriously discussed. Prostitution, pornography, sexual identity, incest, and sexual harassment are discussed seriously in other arenas. What makes these

issues different when they appear on talk shows is the way in which they are framed. They are trivialized, and personalized. It is not the subjects alone that makes these shows trash, but the way that the subjects are presented.

In attacking talk shows, William Bennett wrote that talk show producers "'mainstream' trashy behavior".

He argued that

Almost every society has its red-light district. That is part of reality, and we all understand that. A free society can tolerate such districts. But society should also do what it can to discourage them and contain them. And so, too, with the popular culture version of the red-light district. They ought to remain on the periphery, away from Main Street, our living rooms, and our schoolyards(1996:9).

I would argue that talk shows are treated like the equivalent of red-light districts and that stories that are presented on them are 'contained' by the use of framing devices. These frames function as the kind of segregating mechanism which Bennett demands. They do keep these stories on the 'periphery' and away from the 'mainstream'.

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3. "My Husband Thinks He's King of the Castle" *Sally*
(*Multimedia Entertainment*, November 27, 1996)
4. "A Racist Family" *Springer*
(*Multimedia Entertainment*, February 20, 1995)
5. "Springer Confrontations" *Springer*
(*Multimedia Entertainment*, November 3, 1995)
6. "I Have a Secret to Tell You" *Springer*
(*Multimedia Entertainment*, February 23, 1996)
7. "I am on the Verge of Divorce" *Springer*
(*Multimedia Entertainment*, November 22, 1996)
8. "I Want Your Man" *Springer*
(*Multimedia Entertainment*, November 25, 1996)
9. "My Man Behaves Badly" *Springer*
(*Multimedia Entertainment*, November 26, 1996)
10. "My Man is a Cheater" *Springer*
(*Multimedia Entertainment*, December 16, 1996)
11. "I am a Homeless Teen" *Springer*
(*Multimedia Entertainment*, December 17, 1996)
12. "Love Against the Odds" *Springer*
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