

# I Want My Talk TV

## Network Talk Shows in a Digital Universe

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The persistent decline in network audience ratings has been a central factor in the institutional restructuring of broadcast television networks in the post-network era. While cable and other technological innovations provided audiences with viewing alternatives during the multi-channel transition, the vast array of digital technologies now available to consumers—and the migration of viewership across these new media platforms—has contributed further to the networks' ratings decline. From 1980 to 2005, network audience share fell from 90 percent of those watching television to 46 percent.<sup>1</sup> During the same period, network news lost half its audience.<sup>2</sup> The continued ratings achievement of network talk shows is all the more remarkable when viewed in this context.

Talk shows have been a successful programming form throughout the history of television, typically comprising each network's morning and late-night dayparts and often contributing significantly to brand identity. Audience loyalty to such programming has been remarkably consistent from the earliest days of television to the present day. Late-night talk show viewership actually increased by 40 percent from 1995 to 2005, and the form continues to have a dedicated fan base.<sup>3</sup> Network morning talk shows are even so immune to ratings decline that industry observers have historically described them as "bullet proof."<sup>4</sup> It is estimated that morning shows produce over 1 billion dollars a year in advertising revenue, double what the nightly newscasts generate. In fact, these shows often help fund most of the networks' news operations.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, because talk shows are comparatively cheap to produce, profit margins tend to be quite high. The *Today* show, for instance, reportedly earned \$250 million in profit from \$500 million in revenues in 2006.<sup>6</sup> And, for two of the three networks, the morning talk show franchises have even *expanded* their programming hours in recent years. In short, while the network ratings decline has forced an industrial reconfiguration by the broadcast networks to address eroding audience share, talk shows as a programming form have not contributed to such need for change.

Talk shows are nevertheless important elements in the networks' digital strategies and part of their overall organizational alterations in post-network

architecture. The reasons for this include the particular features of talk show content and form as well as opportunities presented by new distribution technologies. Talk shows provide popular content and recognizable faces (often closely associated with the network brand) that can be used to hail viewers across crowded and dispersed media platforms. And because talk shows are created in specific segments, they have a natural structural advantage for easy distribution, downloading, and viewing as short snippets in a variety of settings and through multiple technologies (from web and mobile devices to out-of-home viewing screens). As such, the content and form of talk shows are conducive to addressing these changes in distribution, as opposed to the longer 30- and 60-minute long-form programming found in prime time.

But this process is intensive as well as extensive. That is to say, networks are also using digital technologies to craft different relationships with both audiences and advertisers. Networks have learned to exploit audience desire to interact and engage with programming, including sharing and discussing topics in online communities. The networks have recognized that talk shows have the potential to play an expanded role in viewers' lives, more so than when such programming was available simply as a morning or late-night ritual (that is, what someone watches during periods of attenuated brain power or while doing something else). Instead, talk shows can become sites for extended viewer engagement with the network brand, as well as the means for engagement with other viewers. Furthermore, as audiences engage talk show content across platforms, these new technologies allow networks to monitor and aggregate much more information about their viewers—their tastes, interests, lifestyle, and patterns of behavior—than that typically available through the ratings data that have dominated the industry for decades. Networks are increasingly learning not only to exploit this information with advertisers, but also to use it to inform programming decisions.

This chapter explores these and other issues related to the role of talk shows in post-network realignment. I begin by discussing the talk show as programming form: its textual features and traditional role in network performance. The discussion then turns to a broader examination of post-network changes in the relationship between networks and audiences before offering an analysis of morning and late-night dayparts and how they are being used in network realignment strategies. But, first, it is important to define what exactly is under investigation here. Talk shows comprise an enormous swath of programming available to viewers across all dayparts and across both network and cable channels. The shows examined here, however, include only programs that are self-produced by the networks and fall primarily within the broadcast networks' morning and late-night dayparts. While some popular syndicated fare (*The Oprah Winfrey Show*, *Live with Regis and Kelly*, *The Ellen DeGeneres Show*) and cable talk shows (*The O'Reilly Factor*, *Countdown with Keith Olbermann*) are connected to the broadcast networks either

through distribution or appearing on cable channels owned by the same corporate parent, they do not have a similar central relationship to the network as those shows owned and produced by the networks for airing on broadcast television. The latter (as opposed to talk shows acquired from independent production companies) permit the networks much more leeway in how such programming can be used (including its editing and reuse, its franchising and off-shoots, and so on). Therefore, the focus solely on network talk shows allows for an investigation into how the networks are leveraging this form of popular and profitable content in their overall network-wide digital realignment strategies.

### Network Talk Shows as Successful Dayparts

Network talk shows fall primarily into two dayparts—morning and late night—and have dominated those programming hours almost from the medium's beginning. Among weekday morning talk shows are *Today* on NBC, *Good Morning America* and *The View* on ABC, and *The Early Show* on CBS. The *Today* show has been the ratings leader for most of the program's history, including ranking continuously as the number one morning show since 1995. The program has been so successful that it expanded its original format of two hours to three hours in 2000 and then to four hours in 2007, using a slightly different format for the last hour. *Good Morning America*, another popular though slightly less profitable program, also expanded to a third hour (as *Good Morning America Now*) in 2007, although this hour is only available via cable, online and mobile media. As a genre, morning talk shows also include the long-running Sunday morning public affairs talk shows such as *Meet the Press* (NBC), *Face the Nation* (CBS), and *This Week with George Stephanopoulos* (ABC). Although the Sunday talk shows continue to garner strong viewership numbers, their specialized status and restricted broader appeal (not to mention their older demographic) has somewhat limited their value as programming that the networks can foreground in their digital strategies (and are therefore tangential to the discussions here).

Weekday morning talk shows are organizationally related to network news divisions (*The View* as exception), but are widely considered both institutionally and by audiences as "talk shows" more than "news" programs. These shows perfected the blend of information and entertainment into a popular format long before critics began using the pejorative term "infotainment" to describe the blurring of boundaries between the two. In fact, the prototype for morning talk has been the *Today* show, which first aired on NBC in 1952. In its first broadcast, host Dave Garroway explained how the program would bring viewers news, but also information about music, art, science, sports, and "all fields of endeavor we think we'll be able to inform you better about . . ." <sup>7</sup> By contrast, the content that largely fills morning talk today is focused on topics that the networks believe will best appeal to the women viewers who comprise the vast majority

of the audience. <sup>8</sup> The programs open with a news update and incorporate additional news segments and newsmaker interviews interspersed throughout the show. The bulk of programming, however, tends toward lighter infotainment fare, including segments on topics such as parenting and family, fashion and beauty, food and cooking, relationships and sex, homemaking and gardening, health, travel, personal finance, weather, celebrities, and musical performances. The historical contrast is instructive in that the focus on women as primary viewing audience and the gendered grouping of topics have become two of the central areas through which morning talk has been exploited in the networks' digital strategies (as discussed below).

The infotainment approach to morning talk subjects has traditionally been designed with the "homemaker" in mind, recognizing that lighter content requires less concentration in viewers who are typically occupied by morning breakfast and family mobilization routines. Also central to talk show appeal has been the aura of intimacy and friendliness (between the cast members and with viewers) that the morning talk team is capable of creating. The casts are most successful when projecting themselves as likeable companions, even a family, such as the *Today* show's co-anchors Meredith Vieira as bubbly sister and Matt Lauer as steadfast brother, with Al Roker and Willard Scott as wacky but lovable uncles. Katie Couric (*Today*) and Diane Sawyer (*GM1*) are also two recent hosts that have been enormously successful in crafting a pitch-perfect relationship with viewers through their on-screen personas. Finally, morning talk shows also try to steer clear of controversial topics, although breaking headlines or long-running news events can sometimes make such topics unavoidable. When ratings began to sag for all morning shows in spring of 2007, networks and advertisers questioned whether network audience drift had finally reached the morning daypart or whether (women) viewers were simply experiencing fatigue with stories such as the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. <sup>9</sup> Later that year, when the *Today* show needed to cover the increased public awareness and concern over the gloomy issue of global warming and climate change, it was able to get a big bounce in ratings by sending its crews to the north and south poles and the equator (tinting the extended coverage "Ends of the Earth"), thereby transforming a potentially downbeat story with catastrophic implications into a fun travelogue piece, later available for purchase on DVD for \$29.95! <sup>10</sup>

As with the morning shows, the late-night daypart has historically been dominated by entertainment talk shows. Among late night network talk shows are *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno* and *Late Night with Conan O'Brien* (NBC), *The Late Show with David Letterman* and *The Late, Late Show with Craig Ferguson* (CBS), and *Jimmy Kimmel Live!* (ABC). These shows too are largely driven by the personality, talents, and charisma of their hosts (recognized by their name's placement in the show's title). And here too, although to a lesser degree, the shows attempt to create a feel-good repartee (in this instance, of male "buddies") between host and co-host

or handleader. Late-night talk is also a highly segmented programming form, including a comedic monologue, comedy sketches, video vignettes, musical performances, and celebrity guest interviews. Most comedian hosts have perfected some sort of signature comedy piece that is prominently and repeatedly offered, such as Letterman's "Top Ten List" and "Stupid Pet Tricks" or Leno's "Jaywalking." Similar to morning talk, late-night talk is designed for ritualistic viewing. Although the comedians might engage in spectacle or perhaps occasional shock comedy, they rarely offer up much in the way of unscripted or controversial material. Although ABC flirted with such a format for several years with the political entertainment talk show *Politically Incorrect with Bill Maher* (1997–2002), most late-night talk is designed to amuse rather than bemuse the viewer.

Both morning and late-night network talk shows, therefore, are long-running programming forms that have proven highly popular with audiences for many of the reasons just described. And, as noted, neither daypart has experienced the levels of audience erosion evident during prime time. Given this cheap and profitable form with identifiable stars, segmented light-entertainment content, and a loyal audience base that shares a ritual relationship to the form, the networks have attempted to exploit talk programming in their efforts toward industrial reconfiguration. Primary to such moves is the broader reformulation of the relationship between networks and audiences. The discussion now turns to an examination of this reformulation and, in particular, how this altered relationship has direct bearing on the role that talk shows are being asked to play in the post-network industrial model.

### Changing the Audience—Network Relationship

Arguably, the most important change in post-network television is the transformed relationship between audiences and broadcast networks—a transformation that in many ways redefines traditional definitions of both. Industry executives realize that, while the value in networks lies in the creation of successful content, as businesses they are being forced to transform themselves from content companies to audience companies.<sup>11</sup> This reformulation has several meanings. The first relates to the distribution of content. Television networks can no longer simply rely on the production of quality content to assure their financial success as they could—at least to some degree—in the oligopolistic network era when audiences had fewer viewing choices and little control over what they watched. Instead, as audiences have become widely dispersed across an array of media platforms—DVRs, DVDs, a variety of web locations, mobile devices (including mobile phones and iPods), and others—television networks must go where audiences are located instead of simply counting on audiences coming to them. Networks must be very intentional about how they distribute their content outside of the traditional network-affiliate relationship precisely

because viewers have so many choices, including the choice not to watch television altogether. As Jeff Gaspin, president of NBC Universal Television Group, describes it, "The shift from programmer to consumer controlling program choices is the biggest change in the media business in the past 25 or 30 years."<sup>12</sup>

In attempting to go where audiences are located, the networks have employed several strategies. One has been to own and control the means of distribution either by buying up important Internet and cable properties (such as News Corp.'s purchase of MySpace, CBS's purchase of CNET, and NBC Universal's acquisition of iVillage) or by creating their own portals to which consumers must come for free ad-supported content (such as NBCU and News Corp.'s partnership to create Hulu.com). So, for example (as discussed at length below), NBCU decided to build on its top-ranked *Today* show franchise and existing cable channel Bravo (both highly popular with women viewers) to reach an even larger female demographic by extending the network's reach across media platforms. Hence, in addition to its purchase of the web community iVillage, it also acquired the cable channel Oxygen, TheKnot.com (a wedding planning website), and Pop Sugar (an online community), while also forming a content sharing partnership with BlogHer, a female-oriented community of 2,200 individual blogs. The network combined these media assets into a Women@NBCU division to coordinate cross-media content-sharing, collaboration, promotion, and advertising. While there is little evidence yet that such acquisitions are enhancing network value, it is nevertheless important to highlight the network's belief that its popular and highly profitable talk show franchise was the place to start in crafting and building a plan for broader distributive reach and cross-platform synergy.

An alternate approach has been to create strategic partnerships for the sharing and distribution of video content with a variety of new media companies (such as iTunes, YouTube, AOL, Microsoft, Yahoo!, Fancast.com, and Joost), mobile phone carriers, and others. Fancast, in particular, allows Comcast subscribers to view content across screens or on the screen of their choosing.<sup>13</sup> After a failed attempt to obtain proprietary control of content distribution through its own web portal (an initiative called Innertube, which one CBS executive later ridiculed as CBS.com/nobodycomeshere), CBS quickly learned that it made more sense to let its content flow freely across the web through outlets not under its control but through which it nevertheless received remuneration. As CBS Interactive president Quincy Smith explains, "you don't win by telling everybody where they should go, you win by being where everyone else is."<sup>14</sup> As a result of developing what the network now calls its CBS Interactive Audience Network, it extended its "effective reach" from 13 percent of the web to 92 percent.<sup>15</sup> So, as we will see in the discussions that follow, the short segmented form that largely comprises talk programming such as David Letterman's monologues and "Top Ten Lists" becomes the perfect content form for such broad-based distribution in outlets

