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7 beyond genre cable's impact on the talk show

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Talk is, and always has been, central to television.¹ The talk show, a standardized yet malleable and recombinant format featured in every daypart of television programming, continues to reign as one of the most consistently popular programming genres on television. Indeed, the talk show's presence on television has only increased over the last decade due to the explosive growth of both syndicated and cable programming. Broadcast stations have gobbled up a variety of syndicated talk shows featuring the spectacle performance of personal, intimate relationships, a practice that has led to the displacement of soap operas as the dominant genre in afternoon programming. There has been no shortage of scholarly attention to this shift in industrial, textual, and audience practices related to afternoon talk shows.² What has been underanalyzed, however, is the concurrent role of cable television in reshaping and reconstituting the talk show genre. Although the 1990s witnessed the rapid expansion of cable networks—and, in turn, these programming entities' search for inexpensive original content that could provide brand distinctiveness (see Edgerton and Nicholas's chapter in this volume)—there has been relatively little critical examination of how the talk show has been part of that expansion and, in turn, how the talk show genre has changed as a result.

This chapter seeks to address that oversight, though not by surveying the array of talk formats that have appeared across the great diversity of new cable networks over the last decade. Instead, the emphasis here is

on two landmark cable programs and a cable network, all developed in the early to mid-1990s, and all of which have had a significant impact on the talk genre in various ways. Their significance is not that they have simply introduced new talk programming formulas that have been replicated across the television landscape, but that in the process, each has also blurred and transformed preexisting generic boundaries. These influential programs and their respective networks include *Politically Incorrect* on Comedy Central (1993–96), the Fox News cable network, and *The Real World* (1992–) on MTV. It is important to note at the outset that this discussion does not treat *The Real World* as a talk show per se, for it fits more properly within the genre of reality programming (as examined by Ron Simon in this volume). Nevertheless, *The Real World* is examined here because it exemplifies the role of contemporary reality programming in blurring boundaries between the reality and talk genres and, in the process, actively challenges the conception of the talk show as a stable or even distinct genre.

The blurred generic boundaries produced by each of these programs are seen most clearly when employing the categories crafted by Robert Epler and Bernard Timberg in their taxonomy of talk on television: “entertainment talk” (such as *The Tonight Show* [1954–] and *The Jerry Springer Show* [1991–]), “news talk” (such as *Meet the Press* [1947–] and *Washington Week in Review* [1967–]), and “socially situated talk” (such as *Judge Judy* [1996–] and *Survivor* [2000–]).³ Although considered by the industry and critics alike as an entertainment talk show, *Politically Incorrect* was instrumental in the blurring of boundaries between entertainment and news talk programming. It led the way for subsequent shows such as *Dennis Miller Live* (HBO, 1994–2002) and *The Daily Show* (Comedy Central, 1996–) to mix and blend the traditionally distinct talk show assemblage of celebrity talk, on the one hand, and serious-minded political talk by experts, on the other. In the process, *Politically Incorrect* challenged the status (if not the validity) of programs in both existing categories.

Similarly, Fox News has blurred the boundaries between news/information and advocacy/opinion. In the early 1980s, CNN altered the television landscape by offering extended news coverage around the clock, though sprinkled with intermittent public affairs talk programming to fill out the twenty-four-hour broadcast cycle. By the late 1990s, however, CNN's competitor, Fox News, had transformed television news as a genre entirely, elevating talk shows to the status of news and substituting interpretation for information, opinions for reporting. As the rat-

ings leader in cable news, Fox's stunning success with its overtly ideological programming has led all cable "news" outlets, including CNN, MSNBC, and CNBC, to respond to the competition by moving away from reporting (especially in prime-time hours) and, instead, featuring more talk show programming than news broadcasts.⁴

Finally, MTV's success with the documentary-style, unscripted soap opera *The Real World* laid the groundwork for much of the reality programming that has dominated entertainment television of late. These shows blur the boundaries between public and private life, offering a reconstitution of how lives will be played out on the public stage. Though they borrow freely from other genres (such as the documentary, the game show, the demonstration show, and the dating show), the primary activity in many forms of reality programming is talk (whether through dramatic conflicts, interviews, or confessionals). This can be seen, for instance, in the discussions of aesthetic design on *Trading Spaces* (2000–), the bickering between shop workers on *American Chopper* (2003–), or the banal ruminations of the airheaded superstar Jessica Simpson on *Newlyweds: Nick & Jessica* (2003–).

Although some readers may resist the connection between reality programming and the talk genre, much of the literature on both talk and reality programming considers these as part of the same televisual phenomena.⁵ Indeed, Eriq and Timberg's category of "socially situated talk" provides just such a designation for housing the disparate forms of talk produced in reality programming.⁶ And, as will be discussed later, the popularity of reality talk is part and parcel of the larger cultural interest in "reality" entertainment that, as John Corner puts it, offers "more relaxed, franker, and revelatory kinds of speech."⁷

The chapter begins by considering the industrial and cultural-political environment from which these landmark cable programs and cable networks emerged in the 1990s, including how and why these factors helped alter talk programming as a genre and continue to influence this programming today. I then move to a discussion of the ways in which reality programs such as *The Real World* recast intimate talk on television in ways that resemble the talk show, yet compose a new form of serialized talk. The chapter concludes by examining whether cable programming has hence brought us to a place where the myriad forms of talk on television challenge the notion of "talk show as genre" *entirely*. I argue that television talk is now beyond genre because contemporary cable programming actively works against any stable notion of what constitutes talk as a distinctive category.⁸

Cable Talk Programming in the 1990s

The single most important issue facing the television industry in the 1990s was increased competition between the broadcast oligopoly and cable programmers. Cable television had already presented alternatives for viewers throughout the 1980s, but as more and more neighborhoods were wired for cable and the bandwidth capacity of cable operators increased, the cable programming side of the industry was poised for a rapid expansion of new networks and programming options. As one broadcasting executive argued in 1993, "It's not business as usual anymore. We've got to find ways to re-create this business so that it will survive into the next decade."⁹ The competition to draw audiences away from their entrenched viewing habits with broadcast programming was exacerbated for cable programmers by a simultaneous battle between newer and more established cable programmers. New cable channels were desperate to create programming that would give them an identity with viewers and, in turn, increased cable system carriage. Established cable networks, on the other hand, were beginning to see their audience share shrink as a result of viewers having more choices from which to select. They also realized that their own product (for instance, music, sports, and news) was beginning to lose its novelty as a stand-alone programming format. This was exactly the situation faced by Comedy Central, a new cable network established in 1991, and MTV, created in 1981 but facing a declining audience share by the early 1990s.

Comedy Central was born of the merger between Time Warner's Comedy Channel and Viacom's HA! TV Comedy Network and immediately began to search for a formula that would make the network more than simply a location for stand-up comedy routines and sitcom reruns.¹⁰ The network, therefore, needed programming that was distinctive and original, something that would define the channel in viewers' eyes. Original programming, such as sitcoms or comedies, can be expensive to produce, while talk programming is famously not. The network, then, began a "quest to be more topical," as network executives put it, by mining news and other political events for their comic potential through various talking head or running commentary gags. After exploiting George H. W. Bush's State of the Union address and the political party conventions in 1992, the network adopted the slogan "Same World, Different Take" as a means of branding itself as a smart and savvy political animal—that is, a place to watch comedy with a purpose. It was with this thinking that the network purchased a new talk show called *Politi-*

cally Incorrect from Brillstein-Grey Entertainment and HBO Downtown Productions (a program that was the brainchild of stand-up comedian Bill Maher). This hybrid political-entertainment talk show, featuring Maher and four other “public persons” (television and movie actors, comedians, musicians, athletes, journalists, novelists, politicians, and lobbyists) in a roundtable format discussing politics, was an inexpensive acquisition that went on to become the network’s flagship program before departing to network television (ABC) in early 1997. Comedy Central recognized the significance of this impending loss and thus created *The Daily Show* in 1996, another inexpensive political-entertainment talk show, as *Politically Incorrect*’s replacement (and new standard-bearer for the network).

If inexpensive talk-centered programming was popular enough to become the top-rated show on a comedy network, why not create a talk network itself composed of nothing more than such programming? This was the intent of several media corporations in the mid-1990s, including NBC (America’s Talking), Multimedia/Gannett (The Talk Channel), and the Free Congress Foundation (National Empowerment Television). All these networks eventually failed, but NBC’s efforts with America’s Talking are worthy of consideration in light of what resulted. America’s Talking was born on July 4, 1994, and was dedicated to all-talk programming (an effort to expand the limited talk television concept NBC was featuring on CNBC during prime-time hours). With talk radio’s enormous popularity in mind, the network hired Roger Ailes, former Republican Party strategist and the executive producer of Rush Limbaugh’s syndicated television program, to head both America’s Talking and CNBC. As a result, Ailes brought the strategies he developed with Limbaugh to the new network, offering initial program lineups and an overall channel concept that mirrored the success Limbaugh was having with his “common man” persona and rage-against-the-system populism on talk radio.

As the Republican-based populist upsurge of the 1994 midterm congressional elections gave way to the reelection of Democratic president Bill Clinton in 1996, the belief that a television channel based solely on the all-talk format could be successful had proved unfounded. The network recognized this and received a transfusion of cash by joining forces with Microsoft to create the all-news channel MSNBC in 1996, which was designed to compete with CNN and the also newly founded Fox News. With this change, Roger Ailes departed America’s Talking to become CEO at Fox News. Whereas Ailes previously failed to capitalize on

his efforts to feature conservative and bombastic talk programming with both *Rush Limbaugh* (1992) and America’s Talking, this formula finally proved successful by cloaking it under the mantle of news reporting and journalistic “objectivity” (branding his new network “Fair & Balanced,” in contradistinction to his supposedly liberal competitor, CNN). The irony, of course, is that the network jumped to the lead of the cable *news* ratings pack by producing more *talk* programming than news reporting, yet using the label of “news” as a more acceptable paradigmatic framework. As ABC News president David Weston explains it, there are “powerful reasons for the embrace we’re seeing of opinion journalism on TV. It’s vivid. It’s entertaining. And let’s face it: It’s less expensive.”¹¹

Beyond the search for inexpensive programming that the talk genre so easily provided, Weston’s observation here leads to the second but related contextual feature of cable television programming in the mid-1990s—that is, style. John Thornton Caldwell argues that the competition between broadcast and cable networks also led to an intensive program of innovation and stylistic development. The new look, what he calls “televisuality,” is an aesthetic tendency toward excessive style. “Television moved from a framework that approached broadcasting primarily as a form of word-based rhetoric and transmission,” he argues, “to a visually based mythology, framework, and aesthetic based on extreme self-consciousness of style.”¹² Style became the subject, the defining practice of television as a means of attaining a distinctive look in the battle for audience share. Excessive style, though, is more than simply a visual phenomenon. It becomes a means of developing a “look” by individualizing programs in viewers’ minds via their distinctive appeal.

A driving force behind the need for this new exhibitionism was the changing relationship between audiences and the televisual product. “The individuation and semiotic heterogeneity evident in televisual excess,” Caldwell argues, “means that such shows are from the start defined by, and pitched at, niche audiences who are flattered by claims of difference and distinction.”¹³ These new rules affect both viewers and industry, and the texts that exist between them. Viewers are positioned as savvy and self-conscious televisual consumers by the industry, while the texts “demand a more conscious form of viewer negotiation.”¹⁴ For both *Politically Incorrect* and Fox News, the distinctive look, unique style, and particular relationship with audiences exemplify this televisual imperative toward distinction—offering viewers something fresh, innovative, and, in the eyes of viewers and producers alike, more *real* than their generic cousins.

