Television Talk Shows and Cultural Hierarchies

By JASON MITTEL

Abstract: The author explores how audience members make sense of the talk show genre—from daytime issue-oriented programs to late-night entertainment shows—through a qualitative survey of television viewers. He argues that the genre is linked to assumed notions of identity and hierarchies of cultural value that help explain the genre’s controversial history.

Key words: audience, cultural studies, genre, survey research, talk show, taste, television

Few forms of popular culture have been as contentious and subject to cultural hand-wringing in recent years than the television talk show. Talk shows have been mobilized as an all-purpose cultural bogeyman, cited as the cause of a variety of societal ills, from loosening sexual mores to inciting acts of violence. Despite the frequent condemnations from cultural critics, talk shows remain one of the most popular and influential forms of television programming. Audiences seem to accept many of the attributes of the talk show that cause such consternation—or perhaps they conceive of the genre in far different terms than its critics. There are clearly competing notions as to the cultural values of talk shows, and perhaps even differing definitions of the genre as a whole. If, as I have argued elsewhere (Mittel “A Cultural Approach”), we might conceive of television genres as clusters of cultural assumptions and discursive practices constituting categories of programs, how might we understand the varied assumptions that constitute the talk show?

One way to explore the talk show genre is to examine the ways in which audiences use the generic category of talk shows to ground their own cultural assumptions and locate the genre within a set of extant hierarchies and power relations. In considering how audiences use the generic category of the talk show, more specific questions arise: How do audiences define the talk show genre? What interpretations do they foreground in understanding the talk show? What cultural evaluations and hierarchies do audiences draw on? What other assumptions and linkages does this generic category activate for audiences? How do audiences view the talk show genre in relation to other genres? How do divisions and categories of social identity relate to the talk show genre and its audience? What divisions, categories, and hierarchies do audiences construct within the genre itself? How do audiences locate particular programs within this generic framework? How do divisions of the talk show audience itself intersect with these generic assumptions? Motivated by all of these questions, I consider how the talk show genre operates as a site of cultural hierarchies and identity formation for television audiences.

My approach to genres argues that generic categories comprise discourses of definition, interpretation, and evaluation. This last category seems to be a crucial issue for genre audiences, as hierarchies between programs and genres are one of the primary ways in which television viewers situate themselves among media texts and their social locations. Generic hierarchies and evaluations are often tied directly to axes of differentiation in terms of cultural identity of viewers—for example, I explore elsewhere, the generic shift of cartoons in the 1960s saw a simultaneous shift toward younger audiences and away from dis-
courses of quality (Mittell “The Great Saturday Morning Exile”). Likewise, the cultural stigmatization of soap operas—starting with the genre’s name itself—is directly linked to the perception that it is a “woman’s genre” (Allen “Bursting Bubbles,” Speaking). Differences in cultural identity have been an important topic of genre studies in recent years—witness the countless books and articles using the etymologically linked dyad “genre and gender.” To address issues of cultural identity as they relate to genre audiences, we should examine how generic hierarchies and evaluations become linked to social differences between audience members, both actual and perceived.

Genre hierarchies and evaluations are directly tied to notions of taste. As a number of influential cultural histories have demonstrated, categories of high and low culture are not universally grounded in aesthetics but have their roots in social power and contingent historical forces (Levine, Stallybrass and White). The writings of Pierre Bourdieu have been quite influential within contemporary cultural studies, arguing that taste is not a universal component of aesthetics but rather an active cultural practice that works to both reproduce and produce social systems and hierarchies. Thus, taste is viewed not just as socially situated (e.g., the educated rich have better taste than the uneducated poor) but as socially situating, a constantly mobile practice that reinscribes and constitutes the very divisions where it seems to be located and natural. Janice Radway’s study of romance readers offers a case study of taste in practice concerning a genre under siege. She explores how an interpretive community posits its own specific rules and conventions concerning a genre’s definition and evaluation to legitimize its own pleasures within existing and perpetuating social hierarchies. The readers specifically dismissed books they deemed pornographic but valued historical romances for their educational function. Both the antipornographic and proeducation priorities of these audience members work to defend and elevate the worth of romances, in opposition to the genre’s marginalized cultural location, especially in the eyes of the women’s husbands. By valuing books that, even though they are widely disparaged as “trash,” can be compared favorably to “more trashy” books (such as pornographic or noneducational ones), readers maintain their own sense of cultural worth in the face of mainstream devaluation of their favorite hobby. This practice of generic evaluation works through an intrageneric hierarchy of taste that reiterates the naturalized (yet fully historical) dismissal of pornography and celebration of historical fiction.

Bourdieu argues that taste distinctions are also fully dependent on their contexts, as a given cultural object might be located differently within hierarchies of value in various historical moments and situations of audience’s social location and way of life, or what he terms the habitus. The historical and cultural practices working to constitute genre categories are formative of notions of taste, making hierarchies salient both within and between genres—generic categories are one of the most prevalent means by which audiences discern, discriminate, and distinguish among the vast realm of media products offered by cultural industries (Fiske). Bourdieu’s own empirical analysis of the social distribution and practices of taste within French society suggests that people’s tastes—which are practically enacted through the creation and maintenance of categorical distinctions, like among genres—are directly correlated with their social identity. For Bourdieu, “classification struggles,” whether between axes of social identity or issues of taste, are a primary way in which people make sense of their own practices and habitus, locating themselves via categorizations. He focuses on two specific axes of differentiation—economic capital (or class) and cultural capital, as specifically tied to level of education. In adapting his model to the contemporary American context, I believe we need to look beyond the dual axes that he uses to literally map out the entirety of French cultural tastes, especially given the importance of additional axes of differentiation in contemporary American society, such as race, gender, and sexuality. In examining talk shows, we must consider how taste is formed by—and formative of—definitions of cultural identity, as defined by multiple axes, and that categories of identity are tied up within other cultural categories, such as genres.

The talk show offers a particularly rich case study in linking identity and taste. This very issue became the grist for William Bennett’s mill, as Empower America crusaded to “clean up” daytime talk shows—code for shifting the genre to be more in line with a “conservative straight white male” habitus (Shattuc, Wang). Talk shows like The Jerry Springer Show and The Howard Stern Show have been so embroiled with controversies of taste concerning their appropriateness for the airwaves that the talk show genre itself is actively linked with evaluative judgments concerning social values more than possibly any other television genre. Every genre is constituted by generic discourses of evaluation concerning quality and taste, but the talk show’s evaluative discourses actively spill over into the realm of social values and “bad taste.” Thus, the
genre is ripe for an analysis of evaluative discourses. These taste discourses are even more filled with cultural meaning through their active articulation of differences in cultural identity, as the daytime issue-oriented talk show has been marked as a locale for marginalized voices to express themselves. How might this (alleged) diversity in social representation within talk show texts influence the identity politics of the talk show audience? This particular linkage between generic considerations and identity politics is a motivating question for my analysis, looking to explore how effective the accounts of conservative anti-talk show crusaders are in positing particular generic discourses and locating the genre within a devalued habitus.

The talk show genre is a notable genre to analyze as it refers to both a shorthand category—daytime issue-oriented programs like Springer and Oprah—and a broader category of programs distributed throughout the television schedule. I consider the genre broadly, beginning with a generic categorization including any television program that is culturally linked to the genre label “talk show.” This decision to look at the genre broadly is partly in response to the scholarly literature on talk shows, which nearly exclusively focuses on the daytime issue-oriented variety of the talk show (Shattuc, Gomson, Priest, Livingston and Lunt, Abt and Mustazza, Lowney). Since the term talk show refers to far more than the academic literature has explored, I consider how generic definitions, interpretations, and evaluations operate culturally concerning the whole range of television talk shows, exploring intrageneric hierarchies within the talk show as well. Thus, I look at the genre as inclusively as possible, including all of the types of shows categorized under the generic rubric, from daytime issue-oriented programs, such as Oprah Winfrey, to late-night celebrity interview shows, such as The Late Show with David Letterman, from public affairs programs, such as Larry King Live, to morning “chats,” such as Live with Regis and Kathie Lee.

To access audience voices, I conducted an on-line survey soliciting opinions on the talk show genre via the Internet, with subjects gathered from students at the University of Wisconsin–Madison and through a “chain letter” circulated via e-mail requesting participation. The survey resulted in 240 respondents offering a series of answers to open-ended questions concerning both the talk show genre as a whole and five specific programs identified in the survey (see the appendix). I will not recount the survey’s methodological strengths and limitations nor the detailed results—I explore those issues in depth elsewhere (Mittell “Telegeneres”). Instead I draw on the voices accessed through this survey to posit an interpretive matrix for our cultural understanding of the television talk show. The discourses of my survey subjects provide a range of responses to the genre that may be explored and contextualized to offer a vision of how this genre is culturally understood, not by pundits and activists, but by everyday viewers and the general public. Notably, my survey participants were not necessarily self-identified talk show viewers, fighting the assumption among most media reception studies that viewing is the only site of genre audiences—media audiences utilize and circulate generic categories outside the practice of television watching, drawing on genres in various facets of everyday life, not just in specific reference to viewing a particular text. In addition and most important, discourses linking genres and taste are often mobilized by people who actively do not watch relevant programs. For instance, certainly most of the condemnations of daytime talk shows offered by William Bennett, Empower America, and related commentators were not the taste judgments of regular talk show viewers. Generic categories are often made culturally salient and manifest by people who are not viewers of the genre but rather use “bad objects” to define their own habitus and viewing practices. The evaluative discourses constituting generic categories often come from voices that would be excluded in listening only to actual viewers, and thus my analysis of the genre’s cultural circulation would be quite incomplete without these nonviewers’ opinions.

I asked survey participants to offer their “thoughts” and “opinions” about both the talk show genre as a whole as well as five specific programs: The Late Show with David Letterman, The Jerry Springer Show, Live with Regis and Kathie Lee, Larry King Live, and The Oprah Winfrey Show. I selected these programs to include the “hot button” programs in broader cultural debates (Springer vs. Oprah), as well as a range of other examples of talk shows outside the daytime issue-oriented mode. I made it clear in the survey that I was not searching for factually accurate or “proper” answers but rather was looking for subjective assumptions and ideas; these cues attempted to avoid the common conundrum of participants’ answering what they think
the researchers wish to hear, a tendency I especially feared regarding questions of taste and value. Through the responses and contextual understanding of the survey participants, we can examine patterns and continuities pointing to crucial ways that genre categories, hierarchies of taste, and social identity work together to constitute the cultural life of talk shows.

My cultural approach to genres suggests that they are not defined by textual elements but by cultural practices constituting generic categories through definitional discourses. Thus, in asking subjects the vague question, “What qualities are typical of most talk shows?” we might get a sense of how people define the genre broadly. Many people identified the typical textual conventions that might be associated with talk shows: hosts, panels of guests, interviews, “an involved audience,” questions and answers, topical issues, celebrities, “outrageous situations,” interpersonal conflicts, debates and arguments, unscripted action, monologues, and most basically, “talking (duh).” Many of the identified qualities were much more evaluative, pointing to aspects like “trash,” sensationalism, shock, superficiality, voyeurism, gossip, tabloid, oddities, lowest common denominator appeals, “manufactured excitement,” egotistical hosts, hype, and materialism. Although this question asked about the genre in broad terms, many of the respondents pointed to specific types of talk shows, most notably the daytime “trash talk” variety linked to Jerry Springer; people using this categorical framework noted fighting, violence, yelling, exploitation, and “staged behavior” as crucial qualities. Thus, many respondents followed the established cultural shorthand equating the entire talk show genre with issue-oriented daytime programs at their most sensational.

Along similar lines, the type of people who appear on talk shows were linked to these lowbrow assumptions: “immature people,” “white trash,” “horrible use of the English language,” undereducated guests, “trailer trash,” “an active but remarkably uninformmed audience,” “dysfunctional families,” “bisexuals,” “overweight women,” lower class, “mental cases,” and broadly “other types of people—strippers, gays, lesbians and others that most people don’t come in contact with every day.” Thus, for many participants, talk shows were notably marked by their inclusion of people who were distinctly unlike both the normal American and themselves, placing talk show participants on the low end of numerous evaluative hierarchies: class, education, sanity, and sexuality. Some respondents did characterize talk shows as featuring people with “positive” characteristics, primarily in referring to “talented” celebrities, “potential heroes,” and “intelligent hosts” featured on programs like Rosie, Letterman, and Larry King. Concerning the identity of talk show participants, a clear hierarchy emerged—programs highlighting “exceptional” people (celebrities, experts) were more valued than those featuring “everyday” people, often who were stigmatized as marginalized “others” to audiences.

This hierarchical vision of identity carried over to perceived audiences as well. Among those who seemed to equate the broad genre with the daytime talk show, participants characterized typical viewers as bored, lonely, passive, and lazy people with extra free time, mostly female and lower class, and not particularly educated. Some of the more evocative phrases used to describe typical viewers included “unemployed drunks,” “people who read little,” “stay-at-home moms,” “people who are isolated,” “people who may have questionable lifestyles,” “people with limited means and a dearth of imagination,” and “people suffering a mental disability they don’t want to admit to.” One sweeping overall characterization of “underemployed, overweight, lazy, unimaginative, low energy, narrow minded, low income” viewers typified this general placement of talk show viewers on the low end of most social hierarchies, while another participant contrasted these presumed viewers with “people who have full lives, who think and read, [who] don’t have time to spend watching shows of little value.” Of course, these characterizations were not universal among respondents, as many noted that a wide range of people watched talk shows and that the genre was so broad that there were no “typical viewers.” Although responses were diverse, this construction of the lowbrow and pathological viewer was quite prevalent, both in this survey and in the contextual discourses circulating around the genre, suggesting the broader relevance of this pattern found within the survey. Given that many of the participants who castigated talk show audiences claim that they do not watch the programs themselves, presumably their construction of the genre’s ideal audience at least partially stems from
these broader discourses that seek to stigmatize talk show viewers.

Similar evaluative discourses are linked to the perceived values of the genre, considering whether talk shows were entertaining, educational, and good for society. For participants who took a generally negative view toward the genre, the pleasures of the talk show were highly questionable and projected onto social others, such as the suggestion that “they’re only good if you want the uneducated perverted and interbred part of society revealed.” Detractors admitted that the genre might be entertaining, but “only to the lowest common denominator.” This denial of audience pleasure was often articulated to gender, as a male respondent baldly characterized the genre as “sentimental or superficial fluff that is just a waste of time. And only for women.” Respondents also linked generic pleasure to class identity: “They just give the welfare recipients something to watch when they should be working.” Critics simultaneously denied the genre’s entertainment pleasures and the audience’s taste, calling talk shows “like a pathetic circus where people broadcast their serious personal problems to an audience that finds them to be something to joke about.” Even an admitted talk show viewer acknowledged that the programs “are entertaining, but in a sad way.”

A few detractors reiterated the common assumption that “trash talk” causes social ills—as one wrote, “they actually decrease society’s existing morals.” This position was rarer than I would have expected, however. Given the prevalence of discourses castigating talk shows as degrading society, I anticipated seeing this discourse much more often than I did. Most people felt that assessing the genre’s social good was either inappropriate—as one wrote, “Do I think Twinkies are good for society?”—or impossible to gauge. Some participants emphasized the comparative impact of talk shows, noting that while they might be socially detrimental, “guns, cars, shitty schools, tax loopholes for the rich, etc., are all much less good for society.” Respondents often noted that they could not answer such a question for the genre as a whole, or that talk shows were no less socially valuable than television in general, which was noted as detrimental as a medium for distracting, pacifying, and commercializing audiences.

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of many of the public discourses condemning the genre as a central societal ill, suggesting an underexamined disconnection between the critical denunciations and public opinion, even when dismissive of the genre.

Not all participants offered a negative view of the genre, however; many admitted that they found talk shows ambivalently pleasurable; one viewer noted that talk shows could be “degrading,” but “it’s fun to watch and feel sorry or make fun of the guests.” Fans clearly were uncomfortable with their own pleasures in the more outrageous programs, remarking, “It’s a sick sort of entertainment though” and that they eventually lose interest as “the educated side of me quickly turns away.” Many people found the “shock value” of daytime shows entertaining, but they expressed concerns for whom the genre was appropriate: “An educated individual can safely view talk shows and not be directly affected. However, an uneducated and impressionable individual may take a harmful message directly to heart.” Some self-defined viewers explicitly acknowledged that they were able to watch talk shows with level of ironic detachment, as the fan who noted, “I enjoy Springer for the camp and self-reflexivity of the show.” Nearly all people who enjoyed the tabloid brand of talk shows emphasized that they watched “for entertainment only.” One fan noted, “It’s like any other sitcom,” drawing a generic parallel to the more socially validated, entertainment-centered, and explicitly fictional category. In general, viewers characterized tabloid talk shows as providing entertainment primarily through camp pleasures and detached amusement rather than offering any deeper emotional, mental, or political engagement.

Those viewers who appreciated the genre’s “trashiness” for entertainment generally did not claim any educational value, except “perhaps they educate us on how NOT to act,” or “seeing them usually boosts my drive to not be like them.” Some fans of the genre noted that the more “sleazy” programs could be educational when they “showcase alternate lifestyles and
value systems” and feature diverse voices, as “you get to see an interesting mix of the human population that you otherwise may not see.” While a few participants noted that “any show exercising the freedom of speech is good,” most talk show viewers who defended talk shows made no claims for the genre’s general educational or social values aside from entertainment. Just as participants failed to reproduce the strident anti-talk show rhetoric offered by Empower America and other highly public voices, the pro-talk show viewers in my survey did not support the scholarly arguments that the genre represents a democratic public sphere or a vital site of diverse representation (Shattuc, Wang). I would suggest that both sides of this debate need to take a more careful look at how everyday people actually use the generic category of “talk show,” examining what assumptions they bring to their audience practices, before either condemning or celebrating the genre as a whole. From the overall lack of either positive or negative responses to questions of the genre’s social good, it seems that most viewers do not use this political framework to understand the way they and other audiences engage with talk shows, a response countering many of the claims of cultural studies analysis of media audiences.

In discussing the genre as a broad category, many viewers did make distinctions among different programs and types of talk shows. The most common distinction was between programs focusing on “public interest” and “important issues,” typified by Oprah and Montel Williams, and those focusing on more outrageous and “fake” situations, such as Springer and Ricki Lake. While the latter programs were noted as “just entertainment,” respondents suggested that the former shows did have educational and social values in bringing up serious issues; this intrageneric distinction often was tied to evaluative terms like “good,” “quality,” “legitimate,” or “informative” shows versus “tabloid trash.” Not surprisingly, these hierarchies were often tied to cultural differences, primarily in terms of class and education level—the assumed audience and guests for the tabloid programs were far more uneducated, lower class, and “deviant” than Oprah’s audience and guests. The broader assumptions people linked to the talk show genre fractured more when confronted with specific names of programs and offered a vision into the intrageneric landscape of the talk show.

Genres do serve as categorical shorthand to stand in for a range of cultural assumptions, but they also are actively linked to a number of specific programs. Thus, cultural discussions of the genre as a whole are only a partial vision of how the talk show functions in broader cultural circulation. We must also consider the specific programs that comprise the assumed objects within the generic category. Thus, in the survey’s second portion, I wished to fragment a general conception of the talk show category by introducing particular programs to represent the breadth of the genre, offering a “generic constellation” by focusing on five specific programmatic “stars.”

In charting the specific assumptions tied to particular programs, we can see some of the broader hierarchies and assumptions mapped onto the various facets of the talk show generic cluster, as well as practices that deny generic linkages and assumptions that may hold for other programs. Late Night with David Letterman was included as a representative of the late-night talk show, a popular type of program that is often absent in the popular discourses circulating around talk shows. Many respondents did classify the program as a talk show, acknowledging such definitional features like guests, a host, interviews, and conversations about relevant issues, although many noted that while it did fit the genre, it was different from how they had initially defined the genre as based on daytime programs. These respondents differentiated between the typical daytime program and Letterman as a “subcategory” of late-night talk show, which was “classier,” less motivated by “spectacle,” and more focused on “entertainment” and “Hollywood” than “everyday people.” Some claimed that Letterman was not a talk show, as it did not air during daytime, did not focus on one particular issue, featured primarily celebrities, did not present people’s problems or feature confrontation, or aimed at a different audience than typical talk shows. Some of the alternative generic labels offered by participants included “variety show,” “interview show,” “entertainment show,” “guest star show,” and “comedy.”

In evaluating Letterman, most respondents acknowledged that the show was entertaining, or at least attempted to be. People envisioned Letterman appealing to a fairly broad audience of adults, with some suggesting that the show was aimed at a fairly sophisticated audience, middle class with a college education, and predominantly white—as one “bireacial” participant wrote, “It’s intellectual humor that I feel would turn off minorities.” Some suggested that the show appealed to those who could appreciate “a New York dry wit,” with the regional locale seemingly indicating a degree of sophistication. In general, the profile of Letterman painted by the survey was of a “quality” show.
that did not fit in with the broader conception of the talk show genre, although typical of its late-night incarnation. This format was primarily based on entertainment, offering a fairly sophisticated and positive program for a broad "quality" audience. This broad picture contrasted directly with other programs included in the survey.

Although respondents were both familiar with and enjoyed Letterman, respondents described Regis & Kathie Lee as a more marginal program. Those who did know the program labeled it a talk show, with the requisite features of hosts, guests, interviews, live audience, and issue-driven topics; a typical comment was, "They talk so damn much it has to be a talk show." Even though most people felt it was a talk show, it was rarely mentioned in participants' lists of favorite, least favorite, or typical talk shows. Of the respondents who liked the program, most were female and many were older, although a fair number of both college students and men admitted enjoying the show. Negative opinions about Regis & Kathie Lee were more virulent than for Letterman, as many respondents called the show boring, grating, cloying, annoying, insipid, intolerable, horrible, and painful. Many participants directed their ire at the hosts, calling them offensive, loathsome, tedious, obnoxious, "cancer to intelligence," and "two of the most irritating people in the world"—one respondent gave the colorful response, "Seeing Kathie Lee's head squashed between two anvils, Warner Bros. cartoon-style, might be entertaining."

As with Letterman, most participants felt that Regis & Kathie Lee was at least intended primarily to entertain audiences. Although many felt the show was not entertaining because of the hosts, the basic "interview and banter" format was seen as trying to entertain. Those who found the program enjoyable highlighted the show's interesting and diverse guests, amusing rapport between Regis and Kathie Lee, and commitment to "whole-some," "clean" material and "good taste." As one woman who had not watched the show "in ages" wrote, "I picture them as one of the 'high-brow' shows." Fans of Regis & Kathie Lee primarily emphasized the show's entertainment values, but many felt that it was good for society, in promoting "values," including religious themes, "portraying positive images," and informing people about events and issues. As one female student wrote, "Children can actually watch without worrying what impression it will have on them."

The assumed audience for Regis & Kathie Lee was fairly homogeneous—most respondents suggested that viewers were "older," female, and middle class. Some terms used to characterize the show's audience included "stay-at-home moms," "soccer-mom types," the "soap opera crowd," "middle aged or older," "retired persons," "maybe some homosexual men," an "older more conservative audience," "women involved deeply with religion," "single, middle-aged Jewish women," and "housewives over 180 pounds." Although most of the people who acknowledged that they enjoyed the program did not fit this profile, the survey responses suggest that people imagine a highly particular audience for this program, far more so than for any of the other programs mentioned. Those who condemned the program questioned the taste of this presumed audience, wondering "who can tolerate" the hosts and painting the average viewers as "lonely middle-aged women who drink Scotch in the morning." Clearly both detractors and fans of this program use markers of cultural identity concerning gender, class, age, education, and social values to distinguish themselves from one another.

Just as many respondents had not watched Regis & Kathie Lee, many people, especially college students, claimed little or no knowledge of Larry King Live. This is partially because it is the only cable channel program on the survey—many responses mentioned they did not have access to cable. In addition, although King often gets press when he features high-profile guests, the show is never activated within the discourses on talk show controversies and thus rarely circulates outside the realm of CNN viewers. Most people who were familiar with the program felt it too fit into the talk show genre, although some suggested other generic terms, such as "news," "journalism," "current events forum," "politics," and "call-in" show. Many participants noted a distinction between King's mode of talk show from the more commonplace daytime form—one man favorably wrote, "Larry's show is the old school or first generation talk show where issues instead of personalities are important." Those who liked King, who tended to be older respondents, described the show as "intelligent," "informational," "relevant," "much more useful than most talk shows," and "respectable"; people who disliked the program complained about King's "self-serving" personality, "softball questions," "boring" topics and guests, and "biased" viewpoints.

Compared with the other talk shows discussed in the survey, fewer people found the program entertaining; most felt that the show provided an educational function, bringing up "serious issues": "He doesn't merely present an emotional response to an
issue, but a more thoughtful, well-argued one.” Whereas some detractors condemned the show’s educational effectiveness as “too facile and shallow” in presenting issues, almost all respondents who knew the show believed that King was at least trying to be informative in a journalistic tradition. In striving for informing viewers and debating issues, many participants thought the program was good for society, especially compared with other talk shows: As one man noted, King “relays good, more reliable information and viewpoints than daytime talk shows.”

The perceived audience for King aligns with the perception of a “serious” program, and thus significantly differs from the average talk show audience. Many people noted that people who watched King were not talk show fans but “news junkies,” “political nerds,” and “people who can’t stand sitcoms.” The terms used to describe this audience included “educated,” “well-informed,” “intellectual,” “mature,” “highbrow,” “more conservative,” and “the opposite of a Jerry Springer viewer.” As with other programs, respondents who disliked the show castigated the audience, using phrases like “the Florida crowd that eats dinner at 4 P.M.” and “boring people—probably golfers. Golfers who talk about their golf scores.” The cultural identity of this assumed audience was fairly homogeneous—white, middle to upper class, well educated, middle aged and older, and professional or retired. While respondents who liked the program were fairly gender balanced, the presumed audience was predominantly labeled male. As one male student, who admitted to never having seen the show but respecting it nonetheless, baldly characterized the audience as “the doctor, the investment banker, the political analyst—the man. It is a show that involves politics, and women are not a part of that world.” Thus, the cultural assumptions linked to King associated the program with a particularly respectable habitus—professional, educated, male, wealthy, white—and opposed this type of program with more entertainment-centered talk shows, be it Letterman or Springer.

The two remaining programs on my survey represent the yin and yang of the daytime talk show, with Oprah culturally linked to almost all that Springer is not. Nearly all respondents felt that Springer was in fact a talk show, with many suggesting that it was the epitome of the genre or “exactly what I think of as a ‘talk show’,” while others offered other generic labels, such as “trash show,” “fighting show,” “junk,” “a white trash extravaganza,” “a carnival show for weirdos,” “a circus of idiots,” “the Christians and the lions,” and “a comedy.” Although most people labeled Springer as a talk show, most noted that it was a particularly extreme or troublesome variant of the genre: “I think Jerry Springer took the term ‘talk show,’ conquered it, and twisted it to his own ends.” Thus, many respondents acknowledged that the program was both the “typical” talk show and at the low end of intrageneric hierarchies.

Not surprisingly, most of the respondents expressed extreme opinions about Springer. In offering their opinions about the program, people used terms such as “abominable,” “awful,” “despicable,” “repugnant,” “terrible,” “revolting,” “perverted,” “crap,” “tasteless,” “absolutely hate it,” “an insulting waste of time,” “an embarrassment,” “downright destructive,” “crude and irresponsible,” “I wish it were outlawed,” and “the biggest piece of trash in the history of television.” Some respondents did admit that they enjoyed the program, primarily noting that it was entertaining, funny, outrageous, and “good wholesome, white-trash fun.” Crucially, among those who liked Springer, nobody suggested that they read the program “straight,” as dealing with real people solving real problems; a more typical response was, “It is funny watching people that are that dumb.” Fans noted that they enjoyed watching the fights, people yelling at each other, and the ridiculousness of the situations with no presumed educational or social value. Many respondents, especially college students, mentioned that they used to find the program entertaining, but that it had gotten repetitive, predictable, and more “tame.”

More than any other show in my survey, the values and audiences associated with Springer diverged based on participants’ opinions about the program. Unlike the talk show genre as a whole, nearly nobody claimed that the show was intended to be educational or socially beneficial, although many respondents who condemned the program did take direct offense at its lack of social values. Many detractors felt that the show encouraged violence, poor morality, exploitation, and low cultural standards, explicitly labeling it as bad for society—much more so than the genre as a whole. People who hated Springer and castigated its demoralizing effects offered a particular vision of the show’s audience that was distinctly unlike themselves—lower class, uneducated, unemployed, racial minorities, “redneck trailer park trash from Arkansas,” “wrestling fans,” “idiots,” “sad sick puppies,” and “people that eventually end up on the show.” Interestingly, while many people felt that the guests featured were actors and “fake,” those who condemned the program also perceived that the guests typified the average audience member.
regarding their own enjoyment ironically and with a degree of camp. Some audiences might read the program more “straight” than these respondents, but within these audience discourses, the only people who took the program seriously were those who condemned it, projecting this “sincere” spectatorship onto a hypothetical audience on the cultural margins. This was particularly striking concerning educational levels: Of those condemning the show, nearly all assumed an uneducated audience, whereas the fans were united by the shared trait of a college degree in progress. Again, the circulating discourses of condemnation seem to have effectively constructed the image of an audience that is adopted mostly by those with least personal exposure to the program, fostering a typical viewer who seems to be truly atypical.

Whereas Springer resided at the bottom of nearly all cultural hierarchies—even among fans who acknowledged the show as a “guilty pleasure”—Oprah was hailed as the generic exception. When participants decried the entire genre’s “trashy” values and tone, they offered the common caveat of “except for Oprah.” When I asked directly about the program, these positive evaluations continued, as many participants offered comments such as “the non-scummy daytime talk show” and “a breath of fresh air in the ‘talk show’ circuit!” Fans of the program, who were predictably more female in my survey, noted that it was “respectable,” “informative,” “not mindless,” “classy,” “truly inspiring,” and “aimed at improving people’s lives.” Respondents who disliked the program called it “sappy,” “too feminine,” “manipulative,” “bourgeois,” and “self-centered,” often castigating the “cult-like” worship that Winfrey has fostered in her audiences. Nearly everyone categorized Oprah as a talk show, although many noted that it was distinct from the genre as a whole in being less “trashy” and more “positive.” A few people suggested that it had turned into more of a “self-help program,” but many felt that it was the “prototype” or “avatar” of the talk show genre.

In assessing the values of the program, respondents seemed to be fairly balanced in viewing the program as entertaining, educational, and good for society. While those who disliked the program generally suggested that it was not entertaining, many detractors did find it educational and socially valuable, noting aspects like Oprah’s book club’s promoting reading and the program’s calling attention to important social issues: “Even though Oprah is not my bag, she is an avid promoter of education, self-improvement, reading, etc.” Some virulent opponents of the program claimed the show had negative social values; for example, one man claimed, “I feel she is being racist toward white men everywhere.” Yet most people found the show to contribute positively to society in fostering education and literacy, addressing social issues, providing positive role models for minorities, and promoting and raising money for important causes. In trumpeting these particular values, many respondents explicitly suggested Oprah’s social good as an unusual and atypical feature for the rest of the talk show genre and television in general.

In constructing the typical audience for Oprah, respondents suggested that viewers were predominantly women (as one woman wrote, “It’s a chick show without question”), middle class, more African American than most talk shows, and “a more literate group than the morons who watch Jerry Springer.” But many participants noted that Oprah appealed to much broader demographics than most programs, offering qualitative assessments of the audience, such as “what some might call decent people,” or as one “male housewife” wrote, “anyone who wants to see the beauty that is still in this world.” Those who disliked the program, especially younger men, questioned the show’s audience, noting, “[Oprah] seems to have some sort of brainwashing ability on women” and typifying her audience as “fat old women.” Most of the participants characterized Oprah as more broad and of higher “quality” than other talk shows, suggesting that
its appeals were more ‘legitimate’ and socially worthwhile than the genre as a whole. In this way, audience usage of the talk show genre is similar to many of the dismissive public discourses, condemning the daytime talk show as a whole ‘except for Oprah.’

What are we to make of these various practices constructing the talk show genre? Certainly they ‘prove’ nothing on their own—the comments gathered are neither representative of all audiences nor indicative of how generic categories operate within people’s everyday lives. Yet such a survey points to the diversity of audience voices, considering how people use broad generic categories, as well as subsets of a genre, to make sense of media texts, their assumed audiences, and perceived social impacts: Respondents repeatedly tried to situate each individual program within the context of the talk show genre and its associated cultural assumptions. Within the genre, intrageneric hierarchies of value and definition help situate viewers’ own preferences, linking people’s taste to broader cultural values and assumptions.

Although I certainly did not gather enough material to be able to fully ‘map out’ the cultural landscape of the talk show genre, per Bourdieu’s own research, we can see how generic distinctions form a crucial component in differentiating people’s tastes and locations within larger social structures of identity. While this survey cannot empirically offer definitive conclusions for the cultural operation of the talk show genre at large, a number of significant patterns may provide corroboration for the bulk of literature on this genre. While many people did link a number of generic assumptions to the term ‘talk show,’ they did not equate the generic pronouncements with all types of programming categorized by the genre: Most people who condemned the genre as a whole had an active ‘exception’ for one particular program or subgenre. Viewers actively mapped generic pleasures of programs they dislike onto presumed audiences of ‘others,’ whether they be lower-class Springer fans or elderly Regis viewers; rarely did audience members condemn a program and describe the typical audience as people like themselves. Within the genre, numerous hierarchies of high versus low cultural value were used to justify both admiration and condemnation of most programs, as notions of entertainment seemed most variable with people’s tastes. Of the programs mentioned, only Springer produced a ‘serious’ level of concern for its social values and effects, although interestingly people who watched the show took it much less seriously than viewers who avoided the program outright. Finally, viewers did not generally seem swayed by the publicized debates over the genre’s social values, as they were reluctant to praise or condemn talk shows with vigor similar to that heard in high-profile discourses about the genre’s social value and appropriateness. Clearly, a broad genre like the talk show enters into nearly every cultural habitus within American society. Yet we need to study how it operates within people’s lives much more specifically than through the sweeping assessments or condemnations that typify the literature, both popular and scholarly, about the genre.

APPENDIX: TALK SHOW SURVEY

Demographic Questions:
The following questions are for reference only—they will not be linked to your name or used for anything except in relation to your opinions about talk shows.

SEX: Female Male
AGE: 
RACE/ETHNICITY: 
SEXUAL ORIENTATION: 
OCCUPATION: 
CITY/STATE OF RESIDENCE: 

Overview Questions:
The following questions are very open-ended—please write anything you think is relevant or comes to mind. We are just interested in your honest opinions—there are no right or wrong answers! Thanks.

What do you think about talk shows?
What qualities are typical of most talk shows?
Do you think talk shows are entertaining? Why or why not?

Do you think talk shows are educational? Why or why not?
Do you think talk shows are good for society? Why or why not?
What type of person watches the typical talk show? Why?
What are your favorite talk shows?
What are your least favorite talk shows?
What talk shows do you think are most typical?

Once you have finished this section, please do not return to change your answers after going to the next section—we are interested in your opinions before seeing the following selected show titles.

Specific Program Questions:
The following questions are about specific programs that might be considered talk shows. If you are not familiar with a show, please indicate that in your first answer about the show. Even if you’ve never seen the particular program, we would appreciate any of your thoughts or opinions based on what you’ve heard about the show. Don’t worry if you don’t watch any of these specific shows—your opinions based on what you’ve heard or read are important. Thanks.

What do you think about The Late Show with David Letterman?
Do you consider The Late Show with David Letterman a talk show? Why or why not?
Do you think The Late Show with David Letterman is entertaining? Why or why not?
Do you think The Late Show with David Letterman is educational? Why or why not?
What type of person do you think watches The Late Show with David Letterman? Why?

What do you think about The Jerry Springer Show?
Do you consider The Jerry Springer Show a talk show? Why or why not?
Do you think The Jerry Springer Show is entertaining? Why or why not?
Do you think The Jerry Springer Show is educational? Why or why not?
Do you think The Jerry Springer Show is good for society? Why or why not?
What type of person do you think watches The Jerry Springer Show? Why?

What do you think about Live with Regis and Kathy Lee?
Do you consider Live with Regis and Kathy Lee a talk show? Why or why not?
Do you think Live with Regis and Kathy Lee is entertaining? Why or why not?
Do you think Live with Regis and Kathy Lee is educational? Why or why not?
Do you think Live with Regis and Kathy Lee is good for society? Why or why not?

What type of person do you think watches Live with Regis and Kathy Lee? Why?

What do you think about Larry King Live? Do you consider Larry King Live a talk show? Why or why not?

Do you think Larry King Live is entertaining? Why or why not?

Do you think Larry King Live is educational? Why or why not?

Do you think Larry King Live is good for society? Why or why not?

What type of person do you think watches Larry King Live? Why?

What do you think about The Oprah Winfrey Show?

Do you consider The Oprah Winfrey Show a talk show? Why or why not?

Do you think The Oprah Winfrey Show is entertaining? Why or why not?

Do you think The Oprah Winfrey Show is educational? Why or why not?

Do you think The Oprah Winfrey Show is good for society? Why or why not?

What type of person do you think watches The Oprah Winfrey Show? Why?

Thank you for taking the time to fill out this survey. Below is a space for any additional comments you might have, especially your opinions about this survey. Be sure to hit the Submit button below in order to send your survey. Please enter your e-mail address below for reference purposes only.

Comments:

Your E-mail Address (for reference only):

**NOTES**

1. I have specifically excluded radio talk shows, such as The Howard Stern Show and The Rush Limbaugh Show, to ensure medium specificity in asking people to define the genre. A future examination of these issues could certainly include these programs and the radio medium, yielding a research question that would probably be interesting linkages between genre and medium that could be quite fruitful and instructive.

2. All of these programs, and dozens more, are categorized as “talk shows” by print sources like TV Guide and on-line resources like Yahoo! TV (http://tv.yahoo.com), sites of genre definition far more influential and widespread than scholarly analyses. Live with Regis and Kathy Lee was the program’s name at the time of conducting this research.

3. A brief demographic breakdown of the 240 respondents: 133 were female and 107 were male. Six identified themselves as Asian or Asian American, 3 as Hispanic, 2 as African American, 3 as mixed race, and the rest as white or Caucasian. Concerning sexual orientation, 7 self-identified as bisexual (5 female, 2 male), 5 as gay males, 1 as lesbian, and the rest as either heterosexual or straight. Ages ranged from 15 to 79, with many between 30 and 50, as well as over 100 between 18 and 21, as befits the large sample of college students included. Occupations varied greatly, most commonly students of various levels, educators, “housewives,” and various professional careers. Geographically, there was certainly a Midwestern emphasis, along with a strong Northeast presence, but surveys came from a broad variety of states, with entries from Canada and the United Kingdom.

4. I am not suggesting that these audiences thus must be apolitical in their engagement with talk shows. Yet it definitely points out that while most cultural studies analyses have examined the politics of media consumption, pleasures of “entertainment” are seemingly more central to audience practice, a facet that has been underexplored within most ethnographic work.

**WORKS CITED**


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