



Graphic by Jerrett Jester

Professor rebukes talk show sensationalism

By Christopher Blair
Emerald Reporter

The popularity of TV talk shows dealing with taboo subjects or screaming political debate is due to American voyeurism and a never-ending battle between local stations for ratings, according to a University journalism professor.

A number of economic and sociological factors are to blame for increasing numbers of programs featuring satanists, transvestites and racist thugs, said Professor James Lemert, who has written two books on the media and politics.

"You don't see talk shows devoted to constructive political engagements anymore," Lemert said. "The perception is that there would be no audience for someone who is not Lyndon LaRouche or a member of the Young Aryan Nation ... We're still a nation of spectators."

In addition to the television audience's increasing need for the bizarre and controversial, talk shows such as those hosted by Phil Donahue and Oprah Winfrey are extremely cheap to produce.

This has resulted in a large number of such programs and stiff competition to grab audiences, resulting in attention-getting, and often strange, topics. Eye-catching and unusual programs are nothing new, Lemert said.

"It's tempting to think of this as a quantum leap, a different animal from what's been on TV before," Lemert said. "But they're a more extreme sort of show one can find an ancestor and

predecessor for."

Lemert cited radio talk shows as media that also have a tradition of heated discussion between audience and host or guest, and, to a lesser extent, unusual guests.

Television talk shows can be destructive if they make viewers believe what they are watching is serious news or, in the case of "The Morton Downey, Jr. Show," serious political debate, Lemert said.

Lemert cited talk show host and former "20/20" reporter Geraldo Rivera's "documentary" on devil worship this fall as an example of tricking viewers with sensationalism presented in a news format.

It's "no accident" local TV news is preceded by talk shows, Lemert said. Local newscasts are primary sources of ratings and revenue for their stations, and a news program that follows a high-rated talk show will "inherit" its audience, he said.

This can have a negative effect on the content of local, and even national, newscasts, Lemert added, pointing to sensationalism and bizarre stories that have been appearing during ratings periods or "sweeps weeks."

Lemert said he sees no indication of the content of these shows improving.

"I don't see any indication of how it's likely to get any better unless fertile minds of the producers run out of ideas," he said. "The more sickening the kinds of things discussed get, the more room there is to push the borderline further."

Students find daytime fun in talk shows

By Kathy Taylor
Emerald Contributor

Talk shows featuring emotional audiences and opposing viewpoints have become the latest craze on television (see related story above). Although some students refer to them as part of "trash TV," a large number of people watch them regularly and almost everyone has seen them at least once.

In Lane County, the number one-rated show, "Oprah Winfrey," has an average of 22,000 viewers aged 18 and older. "Geraldo" follows and "Donahue" is third in the number of viewers.

Despite the bad rap the shows get, most students interviewed agreed they could be interesting and entertaining.

"I watch them because they have such diverse topics; I flip through the channels to find the topic I am most interested in. There is always someone that you can agree with," undeclared freshman Lori Kirkland said.

"People watch them because they address issues that they are afraid to talk about them-

selves, things that you wouldn't talk about at the dinner table," Liz Manspeaker, a sophomore in education, said.

The time that the talk shows are aired also affects the number of people watching them. Many of the programs are shown in the late afternoon when students get home from classes and want to relax.

"If they were on later I probably wouldn't watch them. I certainly wouldn't stay up late to see them," said Manspeaker.

Although some students believed talk shows can be informative, most said they are geared toward entertainment.

"They don't deal with the true issues — they are there for entertainment only. They will talk about any issue that is popular at the time, whatever the public wants to hear," sociology junior Kevin Doe said.

"Sometimes you learn things from them, but other times they are just comical and everyone sticks their feet in their mouths," John Quines, a sophomore in computer and information sciences, said.

Many people are concerned about the nature of some of the

issues that are covered on television, and question the ethics of airing lingerie fashion shows during the ratings sweep periods. Most students agreed that to protect freedom of the press, the programs should be allowed to present any controversial topic as long as both sides are represented. Several people, however, suggested that some topics shouldn't be shown at times when children may be watching.

A spokesman for KMTR television, which airs "Geraldo," said they regularly receive calls about the show that are both positive and negative. He said in November they did choose to pull one show because they felt the topic was inappropriate for television; however, they were overwhelmed with calls, mostly from angry people who had wanted to see the program.

Although the shows are very popular right now, most students believe it is a fad that will run its course, with only the better shows remaining on the air for long periods of time. Or, as Malapit said, "They will run out of things to talk about."

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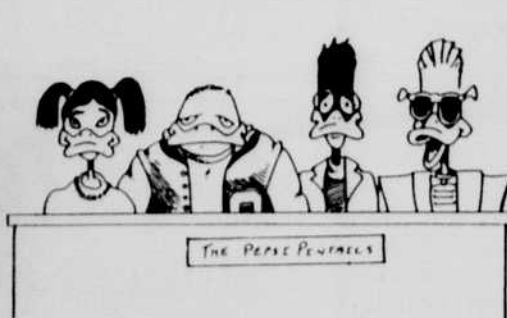
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