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Dear Professor Gerbner,

It was a pleasure speaking with you on the phone Tuesday. I look forward to meeting you for lunch Friday the 23rd.

When we spoke I offered to fax you a brief proposal, but I am not yet satisfied with what I have on paper regarding my proposal to take television away from the British. I would like to hear your reservations and advice first.

I have, however, attached the other proposal we discussed, which I developed last year. Nick Fraser at Channel Four is considering it as part of a series. The working title is "Talk Shows: The New Pulpit". Though writing is not my forté, this short paper may be a basis for our discussion.

I wish you a good trip to Los Angeles. I will arrive at your office at noon on Friday.

Best regards.

Yours sincerely,

*Susan Fleisher*

Susan Fleisher

# **TALK SHOWS: THE NEW PULPIT**

**A DOCUMENTARY ABOUT THE GROWING PHENOMENON  
OF TELEVISION TALK AND RADIO TALK SHOWS**

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## TALK SHOWS - THE NEW PULPIT

As the traditional church is fighting to win back its audience, radio and talk show audiences are playing to packed houses across America. In a country with a predisposition for quick fixes and instant answers to problems, talk shows offer pop wisdom and advice from experts or the man on the street. The priests and priestesses (the presenters) of modern chat shows have congregations in the millions\*. What was once discussed in private with one's Pastor or close family members is now aired publicly on radio and television. Mass media encounter sessions, personal preaching, political platforms, radicals on soap boxes, sex experts and non experts are all given space on the pulpit. Nothing is sacred. Any Issue - moral, social, financial, political or personal - is discussed. Though much of the audience still tunes in for information and entertainment a growing proportion is seeking advice and guidance.

In the States congregations are up to 12 million a day for right wing radio presenter, Rush Limbaugh. Oprah Winfrey, who calls her talk show her "ministry", reaches an estimated 55 million viewers per week in America\*\*. (The world population in the time of Jesus Christ is estimated at 54 million\*\*\*.) These ministries are financed by billions of dollars in donations from advertisers.

The church itself has gone into the business of talk to try to win back some of the congregation. In 1988 VISN, the Religious Cable Network was founded. A main staple of its programming is "religious talk".

\* An estimated 48 million TV viewers and 55 million radio listeners tune into talk shows in America each day. - Neilson Media Research.

\*\* Oprah Winfrey reaches an estimated 80 million per week world wide.

\*\*\* Quoted from "Classified Encyclopedia of the History of the World", Editor: Charlton T. Lewis.

## **THE PEOPLE ON THE PULPIT**

Much of the power is in the hands of the talk show hosts. Based on personalities more than principles they have faithful followers in the millions. Radio critic, Bruce Webber \*, calls talk show hosts "The New Tribal Gods" with accessibility. Eric Bogosian, author of *Talk Radio* , says "...the average person uses people in the media the way the Greeks and Romans used their gods". These mini gods also wield the power to offer "Joe Public" free access to the air waves and to millions of listeners and viewers.

## **WHO HAS ACCESS**

In America free access to the media is considered a "Right of Democracy". The man on the street can get his "15 minutes of fame" and absolution by discussing his problems with Dr. Ruth \*\*, guest experts or anonymous audience members. He can publicly discuss his adultery, abuse, murder, rape and other deadly sins: subjects that used to be reserved for the church confessional.

"Nobodies" are elevated to "somebodies". In New York an unknown unemployed computer engineer has become a local radio personality. He spends his day on his car phone systematically dialing into all the talk radio shows to preach his personal platform on local issues.

People seeking power use this popular pulpit to go directly to the people. They can deflect and evade issues by-passing press and editorial filters. When H. Ross Perot wanted to enter the presidential race, he went directly to the people on *Larry King Live* \*\*\*. To politicians a phone call can mean more than a vote.

\* Author of *A Shelter For Homeless Thoughts*.

\*\* Sex therapist with syndicated radio phone-in programme and television talk show.

\*\*\* Talk show on CNN Worldwide.

After Perot made history by launching his campaign on a talk show, every candidate and his long lost relatives started turning up on talk shows. Governor Bill Clinton, Democratic Presidential candidate, managed a special booking to play his saxophone on *The Arsenio Hall Show* \*.

If the guests on these programmes are not selling themselves, like medicine men miracle cures, they may be selling advice at the confessional in the form of "Self Help" or "How To" books \*\*. The "Self Help" section is the fastest growing department in book stores today.

## **SUBJECTS**

People like to talk about themselves and they like to gossip. Talk shows respond to these basic human instincts. They offer advice and general talk on any subject: Family, community, love, money, power, sex, psychotherapy, education, entertainment, recreation, home improvement, cooking, racism, religion, politics, every subject known to man and some yet to be invented.

## **THE AUDIENCE/ THE CONGREGATION**

These programmes reach a complete cross section of the population with "talk" available 24 hours a day from early morning breakfast television to daytime confessional television to late night talk entertainment. By flipping channels addicts can exclusively tune into talk and avoid any other programming.

\* Popular late night entertainment talk show on The Fox Television Network.

\*\* *Return to Love*, Marianne Williamson; *Think and Grow Rich*, Napoleon Hill; *Men Talk*, Dr. Alvin Baraff; *The Silent Passage - Menopause*, Gail Sheehy; etc.

The demographic diversity of the audience compels advertisers to spend millions on market research. The people in the pews today could be the subject of the sermon tomorrow.

Though the studio audiences may experience something similar to a revival meeting or town gathering, the home congregation is an abstraction made up of viewers isolated from each other. Vicarious viewing is a reminder of the absence of community. These shows are gaining popularity as they fill the void being left by church, community and family fragmentation.

### THE EFFECTS OF TALK SHOWS

To date there has been very little done to evaluate the influence of talk shows. If numbers are a barometer of power and influence, we do know that in television alone talk shows in America get a daily audience of 48 million per day\*. Most viewer's letters say "Talk" has changed their lives for the better. Some guests and some hosts (like evangelists) say their purpose in life is to affect change. We know that talk shows spread and amplify ideas. Last year they fueled the publicity around the Congressional Bank scandal which promoted the resignation of a large group of Congressmen. Religious talk shows regularly rekindle the fires for the Right To Life Movement. Talk shows bring us new information and often expose hypocrisy and the character behind the charisma. To begin to assess the influence of these shows we must talk to the people who watch them, make them, monitor and evaluate them.

\* According to Nielson Media Research.

## **THE PROPOSAL**

Though Talk shows are only a small element of television and radio, we must ask why they have become so popular: How are they affecting our lives and our values? With a closer examination we can learn more about ourselves, America and the modern world. These reflections can provide a small window on the future for the rest of the world in the next millenium.

## **PROSPECTIVE INTERVIEWEES HOSTS**

Phil Donohue: Host of one of the longest running daytime T.V. talk shows.

Geraldo Rivera: Considered the "King of Tabloid Talk".

Oprah Winfrey: Host of the highest rated T.V. talk show.

Joan Rivers: Comedienne turned T.V. talk host.

Rush Limbaugh: Popular right-wing radio presenter.

Ed Koch: Outspoken radio presenter and former Mayor of New York City.

Others including right wing and evangelical cable show hosts.

## **Producers and researchers**

## **Advertisers**

## **Psychologists and sociologists**

Dr. Ruth Westhelmer, sex therapist and presenter and others.

## **Civil Rights Defenders and Lawyers**

## **Cultural Critics and Journalists (U.S. and U.K.)**

Neil Postman: Communications theorist at New York University, author of *"Amusing Ourselves to Death"*.

Christopher Lasch: Media writer and critic.

Noam Chomsky: Leftist Professor of Linguistics and media specialist.

Mark Crispin Miller: Professor at Johns Hopkins University in Media Studies.

Bill Moyers: Critically acclaimed television journalist.

## **Media old-timers**

Garrison Keillor: Midwest radio presenter, writer and author of *Radio Romance*.

Studs Turkel: Celebrated Chicago daytime radio host.

Wolfman Jack: California radio DJ from the 1950's.

Jack Parr: The "Father" of night-time talk. Predecessor to Johnny Carson.

Dick Cavett: High-brow national talk show host in the 70's...now on cable.

## **Clerics**

Billy Graham: TV evangelist and adviser to Ronald Reagan.

Talk Show Hosts from VISN Religious Cable Network.

Representatives of the established church.

## **ADDITIONAL FOOTAGE**

Editorial planning meetings in talk show production offices.

Behind the scenes during live radio phone in broadcasts.

Scenes in the Apollo Theatre in Harlem of the *Imhotep Gary Byrd* live radio show. He leads discussions with people who walk in off the street.

Footage of TV evangelist programmes for comparison.

Viewers and listeners on home territory: In their livingrooms, from their cars, old age homes, schools, etc.

Movie footage from films about TV and radio talk shows.

Historic footage from early talk shows for comparison.


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Dear Professor Gerbner,

As you may recall, I spoke with you briefly in London after you appeared on the "Right to Reply" debate about violence on television. I am an American with a small independent production company. Though I maintain an American office, I do most of my work in the U.K.

Like most producers I am constantly evaluating the effects of television on our society. Though I have heard many experts speak on the subject, I found your comments most insightful, thought provoking and eloquent.

Personally, I would very much like to learn more about your views on the subject. Specifically, I would like to discuss a proposal for a programme I am developing for Channel Four in Great Britain.

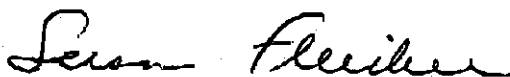
I am now at my New Jersey office and will be in the States until the 22nd of July. While I am here, I would like to come to Philadelphia to discuss my project with you. When I briefly mentioned the subject of the documentary - an experiment depriving the British of their televisions for a limited period of time - your response intrigued me. I would like to hear your views and why you cautioned me about the subject.

Rather than go into any more detail on paper, I will follow this letter with a phone call. Hopefully, I will be able to make an appointment to come and see you later this week, if your schedule permits.

Should you want to contact me, I can be reached by phone on 908-832-7047 or on the U.S. phone and fax numbers above.

I look forward to speaking with you.

Yours sincerely,



Susan Fleisher

GREAT TV TURN-IT-OFF IS A TURNOFF: NEITHER FAIR NOR EFFECTIVE  
By George Gerbner

You may not have noticed, but another "Turn Off Your Television Day" has come and gone. Before we are urged yet again to hold our noses in order to purify the cultural air we breathe, I would like to list four reasons why I think such an effort is misguided.

1. It is inequitable. Our studies have found that dependence on television runs in families and varies by income and education. Upscale viewers have many opportunities for a great variety of cultural activities. They tend to be light viewers and miss television much less than the much larger group to which television has become the main, if not only, opportunity to participate -- for better or worse -- in the great cultural mainstream. Most heavy viewers did not read classics or go to concerts or theaters before; they were just bored. In fact, heavy-viewing children of lower income families read more and score higher in school than their parents did while heavy-viewing children from high-income families do worse in school than their parents did. The lesson is selective viewing, not indiscriminate deprivation. Placing the heaviest burden on those most dependent on television for cultural participation is a bit arrogant, as well as futile.

2. It is unfair and counter-productive. If really observed (which it rarely is), the great turn-it-off would deprive not only those most dependent because of prior cultural deprivation but also those most isolated, lonely, sick, and home-bound for other reasons. Also, in one-third of our families children come home from school to an empty house because the parent or parents have to work outside the home. Should they roam the streets? Sad though it may seem that 42 percent of families who eat the evening meal together at all eat in front of the television set, but at least it gives them something to talk about that may be more interesting than anything else that happened during their day. It also gives parents an opportunity for guidance they may not otherwise have. Previous turn-it-off experiments provide no evidence that cultural enrichment and higher-quality socializing replaces television silence or that broadcasters give a damn.

3. Turning it off offers no criteria for measuring effects. A 100,000 or even a million people across the country would amount to a fraction of one percent of all viewers that day and would not show up on the ratings. What kind of "signal" does that send, other than that of a wasted effort?

4. Turning it off sends another wrong message, the message of indiscriminate viewing (or non-viewing). It teaches that turning it on or off is what counts, rather than using it selectively and with discrimination. It would be more sensible and effective to advise parents to watch television with their children and discuss the values and limitations of programs; to urge schools to teach critical viewing and assign programs to analyze; and to organize citizens for more democratic participation in cultural policy-making. Turning-on parent and citizen action rather than turning-off television is the way to go.