Talk Shows and the Dumbing of America

Tom Shachtman

Award-winning documentarian and author, Tom Shachtman was born in 1942 in New York City. After graduating with a B.A. from Tufts University in 1963 and an M.A. from Carnegie-Mellon University in 1966, he pursued a career as a freelance writer, producer, and director for television, writing the widely acclaimed trilogy "Children of Poverty," "Children of Trouble," and "Children of Violence" in the 1970s. Shachtman has taught writing at Harvard's Extension School and at New York University. He is the author of both fiction and nonfiction works, including Absolute Zero *(1999),* Video Power *(1988),* Skyscraper Dreams: The Great Real Estate Dynasties of New York *(1991), and* Around the Block: The Business of a Neighborhood *(1997).*

The following selection is taken from his book The Inarticulate Society: Eloquence and Culture in America *(1995). In this excerpt, Shachtman examines eight popular syndicated television talk shows to discover the impact these shows are having on the language and minds of viewers. He provides convincing evidence that talk shows are dumbing down or debasing the English language rather than helping American society deal with its increasing inarticulateness.*

Writing to Discover: *Whether or not you watch television talk shows, you have heard of some popular hosts and their shows—Oprah Winfrey, Jenny Jones, Jerry Springer, Ricki Lake, Regis Philbin and Kathie Lee Gifford, Jane Whitney, and Sally Jessy Raphael, to name just a few. Jot down your thoughts or observations about these hosts and their shows. Is your impression of talk shows generally positive? Negative? Indifferent? Explain.*

On an Oprah Winfrey broadcast, when a young doctor confessed that he was something of a romantic, he reportedly received 40,000 letters from women wishing to share his life. While not every talk program can generate that amount of attention, collectively talk shows have an enormous audience, as many as 80 million viewers daily, and as the doctor's story makes clear, it is an audience that pays close attention to what is being said on the programs. To learn more about how language is being modeled for us on talk shows, on November 9, 1993, I spent the day watching and listening to snippets of eight mainstream syndicated talk shows.

At nine in the morning in New York, while NBC and some other channels carry game shows and cartoons, and while Mr. Rogers holds forth on public television, there are three talk shows in head-to-head

competition: Jane Whitney on CBS, Montel Williams on the Fox network, and Regis Philbin and Kathie Lee Gifford on ABC.

Jane Whitney features a man whose problem is that he has two girlfriends. Tina and Jim are the guests in the first segment. She is angry about the situation, while he seems as contented as the cat who swallowed the cream. We later learn that Jim called the program and offered to appear with his two girlfriends, ostensibly to resolve their predicament. Jane Whitney's questioning demonstrates that she knows the terms "psychobabble," "avoiding commitment," "relationship," and "monogamous," but most of her queries are monosyllabic: "Some people, like, sleep with only one person at a time."

Jim's two lovers have never met. Now, to applause, the second young woman emerges from behind a curtain, and then, under Jane's questioning, the two comment on how they are and are not alike.

JANE Do you feel you have anything in common with her?

SECOND Him.

TINA How do you know he loves you? He loves me!

JANE You're playing, like, seniority here. Like, bookends.

Montel Williams's guests are six couples made up of older women and younger men. Each woman introduces her young man, using such terms as "hunk," "sex appeal," and "perfect specimen of humanity," and making sure to announce his birth date, for the men are a decade or two younger than the women. The couples behave as though they are in the first flushes of affairs. We learn that the Montel Williams show arranged and taped a party at which these people were first introduced to one another, in exchange for promises to appear on the program. The basic subject of the program is sex. Queried by the host, one young man speaks of "not having to work for it" and another confides about older women, "they tell you what they want," which prompts an admission from one that "we want a little pleasure for ourselves." Titles over the screen inform us that "JOHN/Likes women of all ages" and "NICK/Loves older women." The snickering quotient of the program is high. At the transition to commercials, footage of the mixer party is followed by a snippet from tomorrow's show, "Two sisters, one man. . . . You'd be surprised at how often this happens." At least one set of sisters are twins. During a later segment of the broadcast, a ponytailed male therapist comments on the couples, using such phrases as "comfort . . . not expected to last . . . emotional ties are suspended." The therapist is then questioned by the panel, which induces Montel to tell about his own experiences with older women. A billboard asks us at home, "Are You a Mom Who Wishes Her Son Would Stop Dating Tramps?" Those who can answer "yes" are to call the show.

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"Born to Be Unfaithful," Jane Whitney's next program, will feature people who have been unfaithful and are the offspring of unfaithful parents. The subject after that is "Mothers who allow their teenage daughters to have sex in the house"; on videotape, one such mother says she prefers her daughter and the daughter's boyfriend to have sex at home "where I know that they're safe."

Barbara Walters visits Regis and Kathie Lee to impart backstage chatter about the celebrities she has interviewed for her latest special, to be broadcast that evening. In a clip, Barbara tries to learn from Julia Roberts whether the movie star thinks her husband of a few months is ugly or just differently handsome. Julia opts for handsome. In the studio Barbara and Kathie Lee brush cheeks and make hand motions to convey that they must phone one another for a lunch date very soon.

Fred Rogers visits a pretzel bakery. In an apron and baker's hat, he observes the various processes of the assembly line and kneads some dough with his own hands. His conversation with the bakers, aimed at an audience of preschool children, employs almost as large a vocabulary as that of the nine o'clock talk shows.

Not yet ready to make conclusions from such a small sample, later that day I watch segments of five more talk shows: Joan Rivers on CBS and, on NBC, Jerry Springer, Maury Povich, Sally Jessy Raphael, and Phil Donahue.

"How going back to the trauma of birth will help you clear up present problems" is the way Joan Rivers touts the subject of her program, but before discussing that she chats with a gossip columnist about the recent birth of Marla Maples's child, in which "aroma therapy" was used, and welcomes a pair of married guests to talk about "past-life therapy." The couple maintains that they were actually married in a previous life. The wife says that through reliving and understanding an incident in Roman times, she has been cured:

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GUEST All that anger drained away. . . . My heart got tender. I got compassionate.

JOAN All this in one session?

[. . .] Then we are finally introduced to a female "prenatal psychologist." To investigate "early traumas . . . impressed on the psyche," this woman helps patients to go back to the moment of birth, even to the moment of conception. She has brought along some patients, whom Joan Rivers introduces: "My next guests have all been reborn, not through religion." These guests include another ponytailed male psychologist, who has been rescued by regression therapy from suicidal impulses, and a mother-and-daughter pair, similarly rescued from allergies. We shortly see a videotape of a volunteer who has gone through the therapy backstage. After the tape is shown, the volunteer comes onto the set and comments on reliving the attempt to get out of the birth canal: "I was engaged in some sort of battle."

From Boston, Jerry Springer features several trios, each consisting of a grandmother, her teenage daughter, and the daughter's infant. The infants have been born out of wedlock, one to a girl who became pregnant at twelve, the others to girls who were thirteen and fourteen. The teenagers had all considered abortion but had decided against it. Jerry asks about birth control. [. . .] A new grandmother allows that in retrospect she does "feel guilty" at not having given her daughter birth control instruction. "At thirteen, I didn't think she was going to be—you know—actively having sex with her boyfriend," who was nineteen; "I was in denial." Jerry Springer nods, and in general his treatment of an important subject, the epidemic of teenage pregnancies, is evenhanded. He questions the women sympathetically and with dignity, although he never refers to them by their names but says "Mom" and "Grandmom." He asks a woman in the latter category if the sensation of becoming a grandmother could have been a proud one, given the circumstances. She says, "I don't know; it's like, I was in the delivery with her, and it's like—'Memories.'" Audience members express their belief that the fathers should be arraigned on charges of statutory rape, but the new mothers and grandmothers all agree that would not help anyone. [. . .]

Maury Povich has gone to Texas for "Return to Waco: Answers in the Ashes." In front of an audience of former cult members and Waco residents, Povich questions Mark Breault, who left the Branch Davidians in 1989; Breault's complaints to the authorities have been blamed by some survivors for instigating the raids. [. . .]

The government's lead pathologist then summarizes his team's findings about the thirty-two people who died in the bunker. In the most literate language I have heard all day, language that is compassionate, direct, and precise, he details the manner and cause of death: So many had gunshot wounds, so many died of asphyxiation; a gunshot wound in the mouth may have been self-inflicted, but a wound in the back of the head almost certainly was not. His findings, being made public for the first time, devastate the people in the audience and on the set whose relatives died in that bunker—as we at home are forced to learn because the cameras focus on their faces so that we become privy to their emotions. While the pathologist tells the story, Maury Povich approaches one panel member whose face fills the screen and asks, "Is this what you think, Stan, happened to your family?"

"Could your sex life use a pick-me-up?" asks the announcer of the Phil Donahue show. Then voice and tape display aphrodisiacs, love potions, and an acupuncturist at work, and a panelist comments that "I'm getting turned on just by watching." 15

That, of course, is just what was intended.

Sally Jessy Raphael's program on November 9, 1993, deals with two 1986 cyanide poisoning deaths in the Seattle area, for which the wife of

this day, it is the worst exemplar in terms of use of language. First, Sally encapsulates the story for us in emotional kindergarten language: "Some family members say Stella was railroaded. 'She's innocent. Poor Stella.' Some say her daughter Cynthia was really the mastermind behind the deaths." A journalist has written a book about the case. He has corralled the guest panelists, but during the course of the program he must frequently interpret and augment what these guests say, for the guests prove remarkably unable to present their thoughts coherently or even clothed in words that aptly convey their meaning.

STELLA'S NIECE I didn't think that—there wasn't enough problems that would institute her to kill my uncle . . .

STELLA'S FRIEND She was somebody that would've taken a gun and shot him point-blank, instead of being sneaky and committed murder in the way that she was convicted.

When one guest is entirely unable to convey her meaning, Sally is forced to correct her in order that the audience can understand the story:

FORMER HOUSEMATE She used me as a scapegoat.

SALLY As a screen.

AUDIENCE MEMBER Maybe Cynthia was child-abused.

As with my student's use of "emitted" for "admitted," these poor grammatical, vocabulary, and word usages are evidence of the sort of misperception of language that can only come from learning language in a secondarily oral way. Pop psychology terms aside, the discourse of the moderators, the guests, the experts, and most of the studio audience members of all these programs mixes grade-school vocabulary and grammar with a leavening of naughty language. Granted, there is no pretense of trying to be articulate, but neither are there many accidental instances of felicitous phrasing. Vocabulary levels are depressingly low, more in line with the spoken-word corpus than might be presumed, since parts of the programs are scripted, and since the guests and stars of these programs are not speaking in private but in rather public circumstances, in front of viewing audiences numbered in the tens of millions.

Talk-show language has become almost completely detached from the literate base of English. It is as though the program-makers have concluded that literate English has nothing to do with the emotive, real-life concerns of human beings, and therefore cannot be used to describe or analyze them. As a result, talk shows exist in the realm of vocabularies limited to the few hundred most commonly used words in the spoken language, augmented by a few terms pirated from the sublanguage of therapy. To talk of "Mothers who allow their teenage daughters to have sex in the house," or to inquire "Are You a Mom Who Wishes Her Son Would Stop Dating Tramps?" is to speak down to the audience, not even

to address the audience on its own level. These lines employ a vocabulary not much beyond that of a nine- or ten-year-old; the facts show that the daytime viewing audience is chronologically older and better educated than that. [. . .] But the programming elites seem to have nothing but contempt for their audiences composed of average Americans—for "the people we fly over," as one executive called them. Rather, the programmers embrace the fuzzy McLuhanesque belief that a world dominated by new electronic media will wholeheartedly share tribal emotions.

Walter Ong asserts [in *Rhetoric, Romance and Technology*, 1971] that the culture of secondary orality may mean a return to the primacy of the unconscious for those within it. That culture's gestation period is being shortened by the practices of today's news programs and talk shows, which encourage the audience to acquire information principally through images, and through a lexicon that mimics the oral rather than the literate language. The limited vocabulary, constrained syntax, unknowing or deliberate misuses of language, affectation of minor wit, constant reference to base emotions, and chronic citation of pop cultural icons in attempts to bond with the audience—these characteristic elements of news and talk programs constitute an enfeebled discourse.

The antidote is well known, since most of the people who create news programs and talk shows are themselves literate and fully capable of using the literate-based language. That antidote is to use the power of words to haul these programs back up to a literate level they once attained. Purveyors of talk shows currently reject such a goal as not commensurate with their objective of gaining the largest audience. However, there is no evidence of which I am aware that demonstrates any inverse relationship between the shows' popularity and the vocabulary and articulateness levels of talk show hosts and hostesses (and that of their carefully screened guests). Precisely the opposite may be true: Articulate behavior is part of the hosts' and hostesses' attractiveness. Phil Donahue and Oprah Winfrey are articulate as well as charismatic people. Rush Limbaugh's ability to deflate liberal icons and to create telling puns—"femi-nazis" for strident feminists—have attracted him a wide following. All three, and many others among the talk-show stars, possess good vocabularies, but they have yet to employ them to best use. All too often, they reach for the simple instead of using their tremendous abilities to make complicated matters exciting and understandable. Given these stars' large talents and capacities to enthrall, audiences would undoubtedly follow them up the scale of literacy as gladly (and in just as large numbers) as they have followed them down the scale.

As for news broadcasts, the transformation could be even simpler. News broadcasts need to take a pledge to not only convey information but to set aside time in the broadcast to have that information illuminated by the minds and vocabularies of the reporters. Permit reporters

as the job of being on the spot to collect it. Utilize television's fabulous educative ability. Employ vocabularies that may once in a while send an audience member scurrying to a dictionary—or, better yet, set a goal of encouraging the audience to incorporate interesting words into their own vocabularies. During the Gulf War, millions of Americans learned a new word when Peter Jennings of ABC News spoke of oil as a "fungible" commodity, which he explained meant that a unit of it from one source was essentially the same as a unit of it from another source. Network news divisions could improve the articulateness levels of their viewers by raising the vocabulary and sentence-structure levels of their own broadcasts and by taking the pledge to use "fungible" and other such marvelous if unfamiliar words when they are clearly appropriate. How about one new word a day? Such a practice would be unlikely to provoke viewers to turn away from their favorite newscasters and to the competition.

We need for our broadcasters once again to champion and employ the power of words as well as the power of images. This is not only in the public interest, but in their own. Informative broadcasting relies, in the end, on an audience that places some premium on the value of ideas. If its discourse is increasingly impoverished, then the audience will retreat from information-based programs into the wholly pictorial realm of video games and interactive fictional programming, where the audience has the illusion of deciding what happens. Then there will be no more market for television news or talk shows. What the informative shows are doing by embracing images and diminished language is the equivalent of a restaurant slowly poisoning all of its customers.

FOCUSING ON CONTENT

1. How would you characterize the subjects of the talk-show programs that Shachtman watched? Do there seem to be any differences between the morning and afternoon talk shows? Why do you think so many people find such topics worth watching?
2. In what ways does the Maury Povich show about the Branch Davidians contrast with the other shows? What does it have in common with them?
3. In paragraph 19, what does Shachtman mean when he hypothesizes that many of the talk-show guests' "poor grammatical, vocabulary, and word usages [. . .] can only come from learning language in a secondarily oral way"? How does Walter Ong's description of the culture of secondary orality (21) support Shachtman's claim?
4. What is Shachtman's solution for what he considers the deplorable state of language on television talk shows? Do you think his solution is realistic? He praises newscaster Peter Jennings for introducing viewers to the word *fungible* (23). What does *fungible* mean? How does Jennings's action support