



American Television, Talk Shows

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Television talk shows have been for many Americans an embarrassingly guilty pleasure, especially since the genre was for a time a principal purveyor of trash television. These shows frequently specialized in purveying a certain prurient appeal, featuring guests whose shocking revelations of infidelity, promiscuity, kinkiness, and bad behavior of all sorts were abetted by shouted encouragements (or disparagements) from raucous audience members. The result is that they succeeded in shaming all parties involved.

For glbtq people, however, talk shows have been both promising and problematic. Historically, they have been important in bringing glbtq people and issues to public awareness, though these shows, especially in earlier talk show years, have also exploited glbtq people, given voice to anti-gay sentiments, and presented glbtq people as stereotypes and freaks.

As Larry Gross has observed, in earlier years queer guests generally had to contend with hostile audiences and they generally found themselves being "explained" by experts. In addition, Gross added, for a long time, talk show producers felt it necessary to balance queer guests with homophobes, often clergy members or conservative medical professionals. These "professionals" would provide more than adequate fodder for contentious "debates" that would, almost invariably, escalate into heated (and sometimes violent) confrontations, thereby ensuring higher viewership and ratings for these shows.

Yet in spite of these media minefields, queers continued to make their presence regularly known on talk shows, appearing as guests on both expert-oriented "high-road" shows such as *The Phil Donahue Show* and *The Oprah Winfrey Show* as well as on the more sensation-oriented and rowdy, tabloid-type "freak shows" such as *Geraldo*, the eponymous *Sally Jesse Raphael*, and the enormously successful (and enormously controversial) *Jerry Springer Show*.

In fact, as viewing audiences became more sophisticated, gay men and lesbians began appearing as the hosts of their own talk shows, with such personalities as Rosie O'Donnell, Jim Jay Bullock, and Ellen DeGeneres helming popular daytime talk shows. Thus, as Joshua Gamson has noted, talk shows came to provide to sex and gender nonconformists both visibility and voice and, in so doing, helped to redraw the lines between the so-called "normal" and the "abnormal."

Early Incarnations

Participatory talk shows have been in existence since the 1930s and 1940s, with radio shows such as *Truth or Consequences*, a radio staple from 1950 to 1958, featuring audience members answering questions mailed in by listeners. The show also provided an added bonus that, if the audience member answered the question incorrectly, a gratuitous public humiliation of some sort would ensue.

Television realized quickly the potential of this format and provided shows such as the campy audience participation tearjerker *Queen For a Day* (1956-1964), which provided women a chance to compete for merchandise prizes by telling emotionally wrenching stories of need, the winner determined by audience

response via an applause meter.

Although in the 1950s and 1960s a number of variety talk shows also appeared, these shows were premised on a devotion to light and casual conversation reflecting normative societal values. Hosted by figures as diverse as Gypsy Rose Lee, Dinah Shore, Virginia Graham, Dick Cavett, Mike Douglas, and Merv Griffin, these shows usually featured celebrity guests and were essentially daytime versions of *The Tonight Show*. Not only did they maintain a definite sense of formality and decorum, but little attention was paid to contentious issues of any kind and non-normative presences were not permitted.

The one national talk show host of the period who frequently featured gay men and lesbians was David Susskind, whose show was broadcast by PBS. While Susskind's show was a precursor of every format from Jerry Springer to Charlie Rose, his exposure was limited by virtue of its placement on PBS, whose local affiliates frequently scheduled it late at night. Susskind's homosexual guests were often shot in shadow, sometimes wore masks, were frequently apologetic, and were often subjected to queries that now seem absurd and offensive.

Often, the experiences of gay men and lesbians were countered by "experts," though sometimes the reverse was true as well, as when, in a groundbreaking 1967 episode, Susskind featured anti-gay psychiatrist Lawrence Hatterer facing off with Dick Leitsch, president of New York City's chapter of the Mattachine Society. For all the indignities visited upon his glbt guests, Susskind deserves credit for giving gay men and lesbians a voice. Susskind seemed to showcase gays so frequently that a contemporary cartoon parodied him by drawing a homosexual interviewing a group of David Susskinds.

The real breakthrough in the late 1960s was pioneered by a local television personality in Dayton, Ohio named Phil Donahue. He began actively engaging and encouraging audience questions and participation; and in so doing he created a new talk format that proved amazingly popular. His local show soon went national and spawned a number of imitators and competitors.

Talking Back

While early Phil Donahue shows were concerned primarily with women's issues, he was not afraid to court controversy. Donahue soon began inviting such non-mainstream figures as atheists, feminists, Nazis, and homosexuals to join him in very vocal forums. Donahue pushed the envelope of what was then considered acceptable conversation on television by discussing such taboo topics as condoms, penis size, masturbation, gender reassignment surgery, and, of course, homosexuality.

Donahue's project of making visible ideas and subjects that had been previously invisible on television neatly coincided with the burgeoning, late-1960s gay rights movement. His show served as an invaluable format for public education about the different varieties of queer presence. His show helped "normalize" gay men and lesbians in the minds of millions of middle-class housewives, who were his primary audience.

A late 1970s *Donahue* episode, for example, featured sex researchers William Masters and Virginia Johnson, who talked with Phil and his audience about their book *Homosexuality in Perspective*. This show in particular provided scientific refutation of several myths about homosexuality, and asserted many similarities between heterosexuals and homosexuals.

Later *Donahue* shows would stress the need for tolerance, understanding, acceptance, and a respect for individuality, values that Donahue himself seemed to embrace. His show came to be viewed as a safe space for discussing homosexual issues such as coming out and homophobia. His show featured a gay wedding and discussed whether homosexuality might be transmitted genetically. His was also the first daytime show to focus attention on the mysterious disease that would later be known as AIDS.

This is not to say, however, that *Donahue* shows were always queer friendly. Sometimes Donahue would

resort to sensationalism in order to provoke controversy. An episode about cross-dressing in which Donahue appeared in a pink and black skirt unleashed a torrent of criticism, both from conservatives who charged that he was glorifying transvestism and from queers who accused Donahue of sensationalizing and demeaning cross-dressers.

For the most part, however, Donahue demonstrated a genuine commitment to destroying stereotypes. Even though his show courted controversy, it never degenerated into the "freak shows" that would become the mainstay of talk shows in the 1980s and 1990s. According to Gamson, the show's producers sought guests from stigmatized groups who would present as normal and well-adjusted a face as possible.

Until the mid-1980s Phil Donahue was the sole practitioner of audience-centered, issues-oriented talk on television. With the debuts of *Sally Jessy Raphael* in 1985 and *The Oprah Winfrey Show* in 1986, television talk turned away from issues and focused more on titillation and personality. The approach of these shows leaned more towards public talk as personal confession and therapy, and the emphasis turned from contentious debate to rancorous, hostile confrontation. This format became increasingly popular well into the 1990s, and led to the creation of what many television viewers considered trash TV.

Talking Trash

While Donahue's audience was, as he frequently declared, atypically liberal, the studio participants for shows like *Sally Jessy*, *Oprah Winfrey*, and the 1987 series *Geraldo*, hosted by former *20/20* reporter Geraldo Rivera, were often quite hostile and much less tolerant than the shows' hosts.

The guest format, however, initially remained unchanged, as gay and lesbian guests continued being recruited through mainstream organizations. As the audiences became increasingly hostile and vocal, however, the shows' guests also became more outspoken and more outrageous.

In 1987 former radio talk show host Morton Downey, Jr.'s combative program entered the airwaves. Downey, a right-wing conservative, had little time or patience for liberals of any stripe, routinely dismissing them as "scumbuckets" or "pabulum pukers."

Angela Gardner, a spokesperson for the cross-dressing group Renaissance Education Association, appeared on a 1989 episode and described the experience as akin to "a root canal without an anesthetic." She noted that Downey craved controversy, openly turned his audience against the guests, and often threw guests off the set.

Although Downey's television show lasted only two years, he deserves the dubious credit of being considered the father of trash talk. His loud, raucous format dealt a fatal blow to informative talk shows such as *Donahue*. In Downey's wake, many of the previously low-key shows such as *Sally Jessy Raphael* and *Geraldo* abruptly changed their approach and, in so doing, turned up the volume of their talk.

An early 1990s episode of *Sally Jessy Raphael*, for instance, showcased a panel on the topic "My husband left me because he's gay." The wronged party in this show, the wife, described to a sympathetic audience how she became physically ill when she saw her husband with another man. She described her ex-husband's lover as "a flaming faggot" and accused her husband of being "a faggot and a liar." When the ex-husband tried to defend himself, both the studio audience and the host vilified him--explicitly for his deceit and implicitly for his sexuality.

According to Gamson, however, the ex-husband's lies were partly scripted by the show itself. While the cameras were rolling, guests were told to tell the truth, while off camera guests and audiences alike were encouraged to perform narrow and sometimes flat-out dishonest versions of themselves in order to fit the show's script.

Oprah Winfrey, whose show featured a scenario similar to that on *Sally Jessy Raphael*, grew increasingly tired of talk show sensationalism and, in 1995, reverted to a format more in line with *Donahue*'s more decorous discussions. Oprah's ratings, however, dropped in response to this format change.

Viewers had, by the mid-1990s, become accustomed to guests and audiences making lurid spectacles of themselves. Many shows depended on conflict as a major key to attract viewing audiences and, as Meredith Berkman has observed, much of this conflict was endorsed and, indeed, encouraged by the shows' corporate executives. These conflicts would typically occur in response to surprise revelations, and would usually degenerate into fistfights and profanity-laced verbal exchanges. However, another type of conflict, the unexpected ambush, had deadly consequences.

On March 9, 1995, three days after appearing on an episode of *The Jenny Jones Show* that was secretly entitled "Secret Same-Sex Crushes," Jonathan Schmitz, a 24-year-old heterosexual, arrived at the mobile home of 32-year-old homosexual Scott Amedure. Within a matter of minutes, Schmitz shot Amedure twice at close range and killed him. Schmitz contended that the show had lied to him about the sex of his secret admirer, and the humiliation was so great when it was revealed that Amedure was the admirer that he was driven to kill.

Representing Schmitz in the wrongful death suit brought by Amedure's family, attorney Geoffrey Fieger argued that the motive for Amedure's murder was a case of homosexual panic and alleged that *The Jenny Jones Show* was at least partially responsible for the killing.

Although there was no scientific basis for this disturbing argument, psychologist Robert Cabaj has stated that many people find it understandable that a man would kill another man who professes a sexual attraction to him. Indeed, as Gamson has noted, what upset the public was not Amedure's death but, rather, his homosexuality.

Talking Backlash

In the wake of Amedure's murder and the subsequent \$25 million award against *The Jenny Jones Show*, other purveyors of trash television began to curtail the appearances of glbt people on their daytime talk shows.

The wildly popular *Jerry Springer Show* began to traffic almost exclusively in heterosexual relationships gone horribly awry. When Springer first appeared in 1991, however, his guest rosters routinely featured drag queens, drag kings, gay teenagers, transsexual lesbians, and club kids (young queers who frequent dance clubs and dress outrageously both in and out of the clubs).

Although Springer shares with his talk show kin a semblance of tolerance towards sexual non-conformists, he has frequently wondered aloud why queers so often seem to flaunt their sexuality, almost to the point of exaggeration.

This sentiment is an accurate insight into the thinking of what Springer terms polite society. Indeed talk shows are significant because they at once make sexual and gender nonconformity public and visible and also provide venues for the societal anxieties and hostilities that sexual and gender nonconformists evoke.

As gay men and lesbians have increasingly been accepted as part of mainstream society, however, the need for talk shows overtly to emphasize queer presences has decreased significantly. In fact, glbt people have moved from talk show audience members and participants and become hosts of their own shows.

Talking Queerly

Following the meteoric rise in the popularity of such shows as *The Jerry Springer Show* and *The Ricki Lake*

Show, which debuted in 1993, network television executives began creating talk shows for numerous celebrities and television personalities. Show hosts included Tempestt Bledsoe, who played Vanessa Huxtable on the hit NBC comedy *The Cosby Show*, and Danny Bonaduce, former kid star on the 1970s sitcom *The Partridge Family*.

Among this spate of celebrities, however, were two notable gay personalities, Jim J. Bullock, who rose to fame as Monroe Ficus on ABC's *Too Close For Comfort* (1980-1985), and Charles Perez, who co-anchored the entertainment news show *American Journal* from 1993 to 1998. In addition, a newer celebrity, drag star RuPaul also debuted a talk show in the late 1990s.

Perez's show, which aired from 1994 to 1996, was known mostly for its catchy theme song, "You Got It Goin On." His show was indistinguishable from those of Springer and Lake and featured the same variety of dysfunctional heterosexuals and raucous queer characters, such as, for example, Consuela Cosmetica, a black drag queen dominatrix.

Bullock's show, however, was particularly notable because of its flamboyantly out host, as well as his choice for co-host, Tammy Faye Messner, former wife of televangelist Jim Bakker and former co-host of the *PTL Club*. *The Jim J. and Tammy Faye Show* had a short four-month run in 1996, but it differed from other talk shows, relying on light, non-controversial topics, and a relentlessly happy atmosphere. Tammy Faye, however, left the show after three months, citing health reasons, and the show was cancelled soon afterwards.

Also in 1996, an equally out and proud show debuted on the cable network VH1. *The RuPaul Show*, which featured the fierce drag diva RuPaul, premiered on October 12, 1996 and welcomed, during its two-year run, an eclectic mix of guests including cross-dressing basketball star Dennis Rodman and lesbian country singer k. d. lang.

The show highlighted RuPaul's strong sense of camp, biting humor, and open expressions of his sexual orientation, but a 1998 episode entitled "The Family Show" was especially memorable. It contained touching footage of his family's reunion, as well as compassionate interviews with his three sisters.

Later that same year, the episode was nominated for a GLAAD (Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation) Media Award in the Outstanding TV Talk category. Despite this nomination, however, VH1 opted not to renew the show for its next season, and it left the air in September 1998.

Less Talk

The cancellation of the shows hosted by Perez, Bullock, and RuPaul were part of a concerted decision by network executives to clear the airwaves of so much talk. From a mid-1990s high of over thirty talk shows, the number dwindled to fewer than ten major venues.

Even so, in 2000 controversial radio host Dr. Laura Schlessinger attempted to cross over into television. Schlessinger, whose moralistic and judgmental rhetoric angered many people, especially gay men and lesbians (whom she labeled "biological errors"), appeared briefly on the Paramount network. However, due in no small part to furious protests and boycott threats from the glbtq and women's communities, over 95 advertisers withdrew their sponsorships from the show, and Paramount's affiliate stations either cancelled the show outright or relegated it to late-night slots until the plug was finally pulled.

Oprah, Rosie, and Ellen

Television, it seems, has come full circle. Beginning in 1998 Oprah Winfrey actively participated in an effort to clean up daytime talk shows. Her show began focusing on healing relationships, promoting books, making over wardrobes, and a strange, almost New Age mantra called "finding your spirit." Her core audience also

changed. It became composed primarily of white heterosexual housewives.

Another show that renewed interest in conversation and variety was *The Rosie O'Donnell Show*, which aired from 1996 until 2001. O'Donnell's infectious humor, exhaustive knowledge of celebrity and showbiz trivia, and likeability made her show a runaway success and re-emphasized the clean side of television. At the same time, her role as an icon among lesbians and her status as a single mother adoptive parent made her show especially popular in the glbtq community.

Although O'Donnell was frequently criticized by gay and lesbian activists for failing to acknowledge her homosexuality publicly, she refused to act until she was ready. In March 2002, on a widely hyped appearance on ABC's *Primetime Thursday*, she told Diane Sawyer, "I don't think America knows what a gay parent looks like: I am a gay parent."

While some critics have speculated that her decision to come out was predicated on her prior decision to leave her show and on the promotion of her autobiography *Find Me* (2002), her own explanation is that she needed a political reason to motivate her to come out publicly, and she found that reason in the discrimination against gay men and lesbians in the adoption policies of many states, especially Florida.

O'Donnell helped rehabilitate the talk show as a respectable form of entertainment. For her efforts, she won a total of ten Emmys in six years.

As Helene Shugart has pointed out, when O'Donnell came out as a lesbian in February 2002, it did not pose a significant challenge to her prior, solidly crafted mainstream identity. In fact, as O'Donnell noted in her interview with Diane Sawyer, her childhood--with a mother who died when she was young and an emotionally distant father--caused her more difficulties than being gay. Thus, by adopting and foregrounding a fairly neutral, "girl next door" persona prior to coming out, O'Donnell was able to avoid widespread controversy. In this way, according to Shugart, O'Donnell's strategy mirrored another notable star whose talk show debuted in 2003: Ellen DeGeneres.

Comedienne Ellen DeGeneres, who came out in a 1997 episode of her sitcom *Ellen*, debuted in a syndicated talk show in 2003. Eschewing controversial issues, including her lesbianism, and relying largely on her charm and comic riffs, DeGeneres scored a surprising hit. Indeed, the success of *The Ellen DeGeneres Show* marked what Jamie Skerski has called the most spectacular comeback in television history.

Featuring a mix of celebrity interviews, musical performances, "real people" segments, and audience participation games, as well as DeGeneres's monologues, the show earned critical praise and solid ratings. It was also honored with a daytime Emmy Award as "Outstanding Talk Show" in its first season.

When producer Jim Paratore set out to reassure network executives in 2003 that *The Ellen DeGeneres Show* would be "determinedly lighthearted," he was met with widespread doubt and considerable trepidation. However, the low-key approach to controversial issues paid off. *The Ellen DeGeneres Show* has garnered fifteen Daytime Emmy Awards, including the award for Best Talk Show its first three seasons. Each season since its debut, the show has also become more popular. In addition, DeGeneres herself has become one of the most beloved public figures in television history.

In its first years, DeGeneres scrupulously avoided discussions of her coming-out narrative, her sexuality, or her long-term relationship with actress Portia di Rossi. Since then, however, especially as same-sex marriage and the bullying of glbtq youth have become mainstream topics, DeGeneres has become more open and more comfortable discussing queer topics.

For instance, on May 16, 2008--the day after the California Supreme Court overturned that state's ban on same-sex marriage--DeGeneres announced to her audience that she and Portia di Rossi were planning on

getting married, and that parts of their ceremony would be aired on her show. The following week, DeGeneres invited presidential candidate John McCain to discuss his opposition to same-sex marriage. While McCain stated that he and DeGeneres had a "respectful disagreement on that issue," Ellen pointed out that "We are all the same people, all of us. You're no different than I am. Out love is the same."

Moreover, after the passage of Proposition 8 in November 2008, DeGeneres talked openly of her disappointment, and when a federal appeals court declared Proposition 8 unconstitutional in 2012, she took the opportunity to cheer the decision as well as to denounce a conservative group that was urging a boycott against JCPenney departments stores for hiring her as their spokesperson.

During the spate of youth suicides in 2010, DeGeneres spoke out forcefully against bullying. As NBC columnist Greg Wilson has observed, DeGeneres was devastated over the death of Rutgers University freshman Tyler Clementi, who committed suicide after having been spied upon by his roommate. She noted to her viewers that "This needs to be a wakeup call to everyone that teenage bullying and teasing is an epidemic in this country, and the death rate is climbing. We have an obligation to change this."

Anderson Cooper, *The View*, Joy Behar, Sara Gilbert, Rosie Redux, Nate Berkus, and Suze Orman

DeGeneres has also brought the issues of bullying and suicide to wider audiences, including, most prominently, to CNN's *Anderson Cooper 360 Degrees*.

For example, in an October 29, 2010 broadcast, CNN anchor Anderson Cooper spoke to Clint McCance, school board vice president for Midland School District in Arkansas, who had posted on Facebook that he liked it when gay people died and stated that if his own kids were gay, he would disown him. DeGeneres, who was brought in to give her opinion of McCance's homophobic bullying, told Cooper that "If we allowed this to happen from someone like him, then we--what message does that send to a kid? What message does that send to a child in school that says 'Well, you know, he's saying it, why can't we say it? And we want them to die, too.' I mean, it sends a horrible message."

DeGeneres's appearance on Anderson Cooper's CNN broadcast is hardly surprising given Cooper's repeated inclusion of gay and lesbian issues on his show. Cooper, a CNN anchor since December 2001, has featured numerous queer news items on his nightly newscast, although Cooper himself has been coy about disclosing his own sexuality.

Coincident with the suicide of Tyler Clementi, Cooper also reported on the bullying behavior of Michigan assistant attorney general Andrew Shirvell who, in 2010, set up a website devoted entirely to attacking openly gay University of Michigan student body president Chris Armstrong.

Shirvell accused Armstrong of being a Nazi-like recruiter for the "cult of homosexuality," shouted him down on campus, and called him "Satan's representative on the student assembly." Shirvell was also discovered outside Armstrong's home secretly videotaping him, leading Armstrong to file a personal protection order against Shirvell in September 2010.

Cooper interviewed Shirvell later that same month and observed that Shirvell appeared to be "obsessed with this young gay man," and inquired that if a gay person were to need Shirvell's services as assistant attorney general, "would a gay person feel comfortable being defended by you?" The result was that Shirvell's actions were brought to national attention. He was ultimately fired from his job and sued by Armstrong.

Cooper continues to host *Anderson Cooper 360 Degrees*, and remains committed to including glbtq storylines in his broadcasts, so much so that his CNN webpage has a category solely devoted to episodes covering gay and lesbian issues, even though he himself continues to resist calls for him to address the rumors regarding his sexual orientation.

In September 2011, Cooper debuted *Anderson*, a syndicated daytime talk show. As *New York Times* columnist Alessandra Stanley observed, *Anderson* allows viewers to know more about Anderson Cooper than they have learned in the decade he spent as a CNN anchor and correspondent, though the one thing Cooper does not talk about on the show is his love life.

That may change soon, however. As Stanley notes, "It's hard to see how he can continue to leave that out selectively and preserve one particular zone of privacy while building a confessional talk show wrapped around his good looks, high spirits and glamorous adventures."

In spite of Cooper's carefully deflecting questions about his sexuality, *Anderson* has not shied away from presenting on his show gay cultural icons and topics of glbtq interest. For example, Cooper has interviewed his famous mother Gloria Vanderbilt, interviewed the cast of *The Real Housewives of Beverly Hills*, his favorite show, and got a spray tan with Snooki of *Jersey Shore*.

Still, Cooper has proven adept at deflecting attention from himself even as his move to daytime television has represented a means for him to explore new terrain and reveal more of his personality and life.

While Cooper has displayed a studied, almost professional detachment about his visibility and openness, other popular talk show hosts are decidedly less circumspect. Cast members on such daytime television staples as ABC's long-running and critically acclaimed *The View*, for instance, regularly discuss and debate a wide variety of gay and lesbian issues and frequently immerse themselves in the topics.

Created by legendary broadcast journalist Barbara Walters, *The View* debuted in 1997 and features a panel of women as co-hosts. In addition to Walters, co-hosts on the show have included such gay or gay-friendly personalities as Rosie O'Donnell, Whoopi Goldberg, and Joy Behar, who have provided balance for conservative cast members such as Sherri Shepherd and Elisabeth Hasselbeck.

Although lively and often testy topical interchanges between co-hosts occur frequently on *The View*, issues surrounding same-sex marriage have provoked some of the most heated exchanges. For example, on November 5, 2008, the day after the 2008 presidential election, show co-hosts hotly debated state-level same-sex marriage initiatives, a debate that resulted in the show's highest ratings and an eventual Daytime Emmy Award win for Outstanding Talk Show Host (shared by all five co-hosts) in 2009.

One such election result was the passage of California's Proposition 8, which declared that only marriages between a man and a woman could be considered valid or recognized in the state. Hasselbeck and Shepherd supported the proposition and argued against gay marriage, with Hasselbeck and Whoopi Goldberg--an outspoken gay marriage proponent--repeatedly sparring over the issue.

However, though Hasselbeck and Shepherd have consistently maintained conservative stances about many social issues, both women have recently softened their resistance and backpedaled their opposition to marriage equality.

In 2009, one of the show's co-hosts, Joy Behar, announced that she would debut her own news/talk program concurrent with her work on *The View*. Like Goldberg, Behar has long been a strong pro-gay voice, and she used her presence on the *Joy Behar Show* to speak up for gay and lesbian rights and to combat anti-gay bigotry.

Behar's show debuted on September 29, 2009 on CNN's sister network HLN. It was awarded an Excellence in Media Award by GLAAD in 2010 for its contributions to increasing the visibility of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people. In 2011, Behar also received high praise from GLAAD for her sensitive and respectful interview with Chaz Bono, which aired on May 20, 2011.

Throughout its short run *The Joy Behar Show* featured many glbt guests and allies. It also spotlighted several anti-gay guests. For example, in October 2009, Behar invited Tea Party activist "Joe the Plumber" (nee Samuel Joseph Wurzelbacher) to confront him over his stance on homosexuality. After Wurzelbacher stated that he would not let homosexuals anywhere near his children and declared that homosexuality was a "choice," Behar lectured him on the psychological roots of pedophilia, pointed out the differences between gay men and pedophiles, and finally dismissed him as a "media sideshow" rather than a legitimate pundit.

Behar's confrontation with "Joe the Plumber" epitomized her no-nonsense approach to handling controversial topics and persons. As Behar noted in a 2009 interview with *AfterEllen* columnist Brent Hartinger, "I'm not out to expose people. I'm out to confront people whose views are public." However, this ethos allegedly led to conflicts with network executives; and, after two years, HLN opted not to renew Behar's show. *The Joy Behar Show* left the airwaves in December 2011, and Behar resumed her position as full-time co-host on *The View*.

No doubt inspired by the success of ABC's *The View*, CBS piloted *The Talk* on October 18, 2010. Helmed by out lesbian actress Sara Gilbert, who serves as the show's executive producer and one of six co-hosts, *The Talk* focuses on motherhood/parenthood, and features celebrity interviews and segments for mothers and/or parents in general.

The Talk has received mixed critical reviews, including negative appraisals from Linda Stasi at *The New York Post*, who described the show as a dumbed-down "mommy-answer to *The View*." Matthew Gilbert of the *Boston Globe* also noted that "*The Talk* is an hour of plastic blatherers pretending to be a microcosm of American women."

Matthew Gilbert's "microcosm" observation is interesting given that Sara Gilbert is a lesbian mother of two children. As such, she does in fact represent an often unrecognized segment of American women. Moreover, although the show's focus is on motherhood, it has also showcased gay issues such as coming out and gay marriage.

For example, when Sara Gilbert welcomed her sister, actress Melissa Gilbert, to *The Talk* on December 6, 2011, co-host Sharon Osbourne quickly steered the conversation toward a discussion of Sara's sexuality. Osbourne asked Melissa, "When did you first realize that your beautiful sister loved vajayjay?" whereupon Melissa stated that when they were teenagers, she had suspected Sara was gay, and took her sister out to dinner to remind her that she could tell her anything. During this episode, Melissa also shared a few stories about Sara's coming out process.

Other episodes have featured Sara Gilbert speaking emotionally about her relationships. In an episode aired on September 30, 2011, she tearfully disclosed the dissolution of her ten-year partnership with television producer Alison Adler. Two months later, as part of a panel discussion on the topic of celebrities and privacy, co-host Aisha Tyler mentioned that rumors were swirling about Gilbert starting a new relationship. This disclosure led Gilbert to announce that although she was indeed in a relationship with musician Linda Perry, she nevertheless had some reservations about being essentially forced to disclose. Gilbert joked, "As I'm developing a relationship with you guys, the audience, I do want to share stuff with you guys but kind of would rather do it on my terms, I guess, in full hair and makeup."

Gilbert's deprecating humor about mixing the personal and the professional under the glare of studio lights is a sentiment shared by Rosie O'Donnell, whose *The Rosie Show* debuted in October 2011 on Oprah Winfrey's OWN.

O'Donnell described *The Rosie Show* as a radical departure from other talk shows, saying that it will give audiences an "hour of uplifting, entertaining laughter, family-oriented, multi-generational, kick back, relax, and get ready for your evening." Interestingly, *The Rosie Show* does not make glbtq topics and guests a major priority. O'Donnell explained to *AfterEllen* managing editor Trish Bendix, homosexuality is "just an

innate part of life . . . and it's not a big deal in a way that I could not have imagined when I began my career."

In addition to O'Donnell, OWN also provided the proving ground for openly gay interior designer Nate Berkus, who debuted his eponymous show in September 2010. Berkus, who rose to fame after making over a small space for *The Oprah Winfrey Show* in 2002, soon became Winfrey's decorator and her show's featured design expert. According to *Advocate* interviewer Matthew Breen, by the time Berkus had launched the *Nate Berkus Show* in September 2010, he had already logged 127 makeovers for *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, hosted an XM radio show, and created a signature line of products for the Home Shopping Network (HSN).

Berkus made no secret about his homosexuality, although he never discussed being gay--or much of anything from his personal life--on Winfrey's show until January 2005, when he discussed with Winfrey the death of his partner, photographer Fernando Bengoechea, in the December 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami.

Berkus noted that his own show, which was focused on helping people live better by telling real stories in a way that was sensitive, compelling, and humorous, directly resulted from the goodwill he felt from audience members and the larger viewing public in response to the revelation of his loss of his partner. However, *The Nate Berkus Show* never seemed to "click" with viewers. After a run of consistently low ratings for two seasons, Winfrey's Harpo Studios opted not to move the show forward. *The Nate Berkus Show* is scheduled to end its broadcast run in May 2012.

The Nate Berkus Show struggled and ultimately failed in large part because of its format, which concentrated less on Berkus's demonstrated expertise in design and better living and instead underwhelmed viewers with a vague focus on lifestyle which was, as *MediaLife* staff writer Toni Fitzgerald has stated, far too broad for a daytime show.

Indeed, according to *Variety* correspondent Cynthia Littleton, talk shows must have a clearly defined focus in order for them to connect to and succeed with viewers. With her honest (and frequently brutal) emphasis on financial security, out lesbian Suze Orman has found long-term success across multiple television venues.

Jennifer Reed observes that since the 1990s, Orman has achieved household name status, having had her own financial advice shows on CNBC and QVC, being a regular fundraiser for PBS with her own specials, as well as appearing on news and talk shows, and writing best-selling financial advice books. Like Berkus, Orman has also benefited from frequent appearances on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, though the bulk of Orman's exposure comes from her Emmy Award-winning and highly-rated *The Suze Orman Show*, which debuted in March 2002 on CNBC.

The Suze Orman Show differs somewhat from the typical talk-show format in that it relies predominantly on Orman interacting with and counseling viewers who call in to her show with a variety of financially-related questions and topics. As Susan Dominus has noted, with the change in the American economic climate, Orman's role shifted from pop finance guru to something more like a trusted national adviser.

Orman has used her considerable media and cultural influence to promote a message of women empowering themselves financially. Orman uses her own biography as a woman who went from no self-confidence to self-made millionaire in order to establish herself as an inspirational, supportive, and directive teacher for women.

Susan Dominus has noted that an important, and arguably central, aspect of Orman's persona is that she is also a high-profile lesbian. Orman came out in February 2007 in a *New York Times Magazine* interview with Deborah Solomon. Orman stated that she was in a "relationship with life" with her partner Kathy Travis. Orman has also repeatedly insisted that she was never closeted about her sexuality, which is an important

point of pride for someone who talks and writes about the importance of honesty.

In fact, Orman has been on the forefront of changing social attitudes and governmental policies about same-sex couples. In a 2004 *O: The Oprah Magazine* column, Orman addressed a question about how same-sex couples could combine their financial lives and plan for the future. She has since discussed this issue repeatedly on her show.

In September 2008, Orman collaborated with the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation (F.D.I.C.) on a public awareness campaign that included the elimination of the F.D.I.C.'s policy of limiting "qualifying beneficiaries" based on certain family relationships. Orman continues to provide financial advice to her viewers and repeatedly extols the mantra of personal responsibility, an appealing message that has enabled Orman to maintain and grow a devoted following.

Conclusion

In his pathbreaking study of sexual marginality in and on talk shows, Joshua Gamson has written that rather than sensationalizing homosexuality by portraying it as a public spectacle as was once the case, more recently talk shows have instead forced audiences to change their attitudes, allowing them to view homosexuality as unremarkable and almost "normal."

Jennifer Reed adds that the sheer volume of queer images on talk shows over the past twenty-five years has helped prepare the ground for the current public presence, producing a level of familiarity such that public declarations of homosexuality are treated with yawns rather than yelling. Indeed, as Suzanne Danuta Walters has observed, "The new visibility is not a good thing or a bad thing, although some of it is very good and very bad."

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