

Ordinary Talk

1. Being ordinary

With her book *Ordinary Television*, Frances Bonner (2003) has made a significant contribution to the literature of media studies. She points to the lack of critical attention previously given to a whole area of programming, which has become ubiquitous in the competitive, multi-channel TV industry. This area includes game shows, lifestyle TV, 'time-of-day' magazine and chat shows, and the talk shows that will be the focus for this chapter. Bonner is absolutely right to say that these formats have been relatively marginalised by the attention previously given to TV drama, news and documentary. By comparison, 'ordinary' television seems trivial and ephemeral, filling in the spaces between the 'flagship' programmes, whilst very rarely being elevated to that status itself.

It is also the case that much ordinary television is founded on the pleasures of talk. As Bonner points out, this is talk which is conversational and sociable, with no purpose other than to be entertaining. Much of it is unscripted, so it appears to be spontaneous and 'lively'. It also, massively, involves audience participation, of the sort we started to look at in Chapter 4. That is to say, on ordinary television, 'ordinary' people come to have central roles, and Bonner calculates that British television, for example, requires over 6,000 non-professional participants per week in speaking roles or as studio audience members. It seems possible then to conclude that, for all its apparent diversity, there are three common ingredients in ordinary TV programming: its 'central characteristics include direct address of the audience, the incorporation of ordinary people into the programme and the mundanity of its concerns' (2003: 3).

Certainly, ordinary people doing ordinary talk in programmes of this kind has to be a key concern in the analysis of media talk, and we have already looked at some examples in phone-ins and debates. However, before we advance further, some methodological clarification is necessary. One problem with Bonner's discussion, as it proceeds, is that it becomes increasingly difficult to determine the boundaries of the field of 'ordinary television'. In fact she makes several different attempts to define this

category. Thus, they are said to be 'mundane' not only in their concerns but also in so far as they are vital to daily schedules and thus to the embedding of television watching in the routines of everyday life. They are also 'uneventful' and therefore have to be distinguished from media events and other forms of 'special television' (43). On this basis Bonner excludes news and sports from her definition of ordinary television, but, as we have seen, both of these genres also feature people doing 'ordinary' talk.

Ultimately Bonner opts for a discursive definition of ordinariness, but it is the approach she takes to this that is at issue. Her approach, which is very common in media and cultural studies, defines 'discourse' as ways of speaking about topics, such as the family, sexuality, race, law and order. Ordinary television has its own ways of speaking, or not speaking, about such things; some discourses are dominant, whereas others (or the topics of which they speak) are absent, or disguised. 'Ordinariness' is thus a kind of ideology, which foregrounds topics like consumption, the family, sexuality and leisure, but not, because of its inclusive sociability, problematic issues like race and crime (law and order). Immediately, however, Bonner is forced to admit one huge exception to this generalisation, for many talk shows, a major genre of ordinary television, do precisely focus on such issues; indeed Oprah Winfrey wouldn't be where she is today if she had not talked about them.

As a category then 'ordinary television' is very slippery, and one finds oneself constantly questioning Bonner's judgements. Clearly, as she recognises, ordinary television is itself not a genre, but neither is it very stable as an ideological field of 'discourses'. But perhaps the problem here lies in the fact that this is not a distinctive *category* at all. It is, rather, a practice in all forms of broadcasting (some admittedly more than others) where 'ordinariness' is displayed in the talk that is produced. In these terms there couldn't be anything more ordinary than a news programme which uses conversational direct address to explain to consumers how to save money on electricity bills. For ordinariness is not a distinct field of 'discourses', it is a *discursive practice*; not a way of 'speaking about' but a way of speaking.

To clarify this methodological shift, it is helpful to recall the pioneering lecture by Harvey Sacks 'On doing "being ordinary"' (Sacks 1984). From his CA perspective, Sacks takes an ethnomethodological approach to ordinariness. In his argument it is not that certain categories of persons, or experiences (or we might add TV programmes) are essentially ordinary, but rather that 'being ordinary' is something that has to be worked at to be achieved. Overwhelmingly in everyday life, people practise being ordinary in order to appear no different to anyone else. People might have extraordinary experiences, such as encountering police with guns at the entrance to a supermarket, or witnessing a terrible crash on the motorway, but when they come to report these to their friends, they characterise them as experiences which anyone, in these situations, would have.

For Sacks doing 'being ordinary' is both a cast of mind and a form of talk. As a cast of mind, it never occurs to the woman at the supermarket that the police are doing anything other than sorting out a problem and protecting the public, including herself, an innocent bystander. Sacks speculates whether she would have had the same level of blissful confidence had she been black and not white (a black woman was involved in the incident she relates). As a form of talk, 'being ordinary' places a particular value on having an experience. Experience is unique to the person who has it; it is not transferable in the way that information can be shared. It can be told, however, and routinely the telling of an experience involves attending to what is ordinarily appropriate. For instance, it is sad to see a terrible crash on the motorway, but telling others of this should not involve the same levels of sensitivity and grief as if a close relative or mutual friend had died.

In this chapter I want to look at how people do 'ordinary talk' in talk shows. That is to say, in telling whatever it is they have to tell, how do they come across as ordinary, just like anybody else? Since talk shows are performed with studio audiences, are there more or less successful ways of being ordinary, reflected in audience approbation? These are particularly interesting questions for some kinds of talk show which feature unconventional people, with so-called 'deviant' forms of behaviour. Constructing these people as 'ordinary' requires special kinds of work. Sacks's point, however, is that we all, routinely, present ourselves as ordinary because we all want to be accepted as such. In a forum like a talk show this is evident in the participants' verbal performances, orchestrated by the host and judged by the studio audience.

2. Moral evaluations

On an edition of the American talk show *Sally Jesse Raphael*, entitled 'I want you back!', Dave is seeking a reconciliation with his estranged wife, Beth. As is conventional for the genre (Hutchby 2001) he, the complainant, gets to speak first, establishing a context which is mildly hostile to Beth, before she then makes her appearance. In the space of three minutes however, the tables are turned and it is Beth who gains the audience's support. How she achieves this might be seen as an object lesson in doing 'being ordinary':

Transcript 30

SJR: Dave has a seventeen year marriage to Beth (.) When it ended he says that it destroyed his world so he's come to the show to ask for her forgiveness (.) By the way she is backstage and she will hear what he has to say (.) Tell me about your marriage you have children together how many?

- D: I have four children
Aud: loooh
SJR: [ok:ay (.) sixteen thirteen five and one
10 Aud: ooooooh
SJR: So in- two years ago things must have been pretty [good=
Aud: = because there's a one year old child.
D: yeh
15 SJR: ok:ay what happened t- you met when she was you were both sixteen years of age
D: yeh erm we got together when we were really young we were just children ourselves and erm it was really something special and she's the only girl I've loved in my whole life [erm
20 Aud: [aaaaah
D: I er I erm things was really good we had a great thing going erm we had our ups and downs er we had a run of bad luck my father died we had some tax problems er but together it seemed like we were able you know to overcome anything and then erm we then had a lot of stupid fights started up and the next thing one thing led to another and erm she walked out (.) took my children and she never looked back.
30 Aud: ooooh ooooh
SJR: Do you feel you were a good husband and father?
D: I made my mistakes I-I've done a lot of things that you know I wasn't proud of I-I've done a lot of childish things erm you know but she's made mistakes too I'm sure she can you know come up with a lot of things but I thought that together we could work out any kind of problems we had.
35 SJR: So yes you were a good husband and father?
D: I do believe so I made my mistakes but (.) I tried [one minute omitted]
40 SJR: Beth (.) you heard what Dave had to say about your marriage
B: Yes I did
SJR: Okay can we hear your side of it?
B: Erm I was together with him for seventeen years erm he controlled every aspect of my life [I=
45 Aud: [oooooh =I couldn't I wasn't allowed to (.) get my hair cut I couldn't go out with any of my friends
50 Aud: [oooooh
D: [that's not true
B: Everything had to be approved by him. He did what he wanted to do. I- if we made plans it w- it was his plans it was never (.) mine erm
55 SJR: But two years ago things must have been all right
B: Erm no actually they weren't. I er I love my youngest daughter tremendously I would never trade her (.) but I was told by two or three different doctors not to even try to get pregnant I'd had some health problems. He

- 60 didn't erm [SJR: okay] he didn't seem to care he wanted
to have another kid [and
Aud: [oooooooooooooooooooo
D: [oh that's untrue ()
SJR: You say that Dave was abusive to you for seventeen years,
how did you finally, verbally abusive or physically
abusive or both?
B: Well there was some physical violence in our relationship
[D: oooh] but the majority of it was mental abuse.
SJR: What did he do to you?
B: Erm he would call me stupid and fat and [erm=
Aud: [oooooooooooooooooooo
D: [oh Beth
B: =and things you know if I did something (.) that he
didn't think was good he would he would just go aaah
[he was always
75 SJR: [With four children how did you get- how did you get away
then if this is true?
B: Erm the last incident occurred over a coupon he got very
angry because he couldn't find this coupon he started
taking it out on (.) at that time our son was fifteen he
started taking it out on him and I jumped in and erm (.)
things were said and he finally told me to get the hell
out and take my four brats with me.
Aud: [oooooooooooooooooooo
85 D: [oh no no. Noooo
B: You wouldn't even let me get my purse the daiper bag
bottles [Aud: ooooooh] the police were called. They had to
let you let me in the house to get my purse so I had some
ID. I had twenty dollars in my wallet. He went to the
bank immediately following that and wiped out our bank
90 ac[co:unt=
D: [No no
Aud: [oooooh
B: = took every dime there was. Erm I had four
kids nowhere basically I went to my parents house. Erm we
had to walk we had plenty of vehicles but I wasn't
allowed to take one.
D: No no Beth this is not true [the facts (.) look
B: [How can you say this is
100 untr:ue?
D: My son was destroying the house he kicked in a big
[screen TV knocked over a stereo
B: [Why? Because you pushed him () because you told him
to kick the TV.
105 D: No I said Beth please don't. Calm down (.) Come back when
you're more calm that's what happened
B: Oh that's a lie [I'm sorry. You're lying. You are lying.
I am not lying.
Aud: [oooooooooooooooooooo
110 B: [I am not lying.
D: [How can you do this?
SJR: Have you (.) Has he paid his child support?

B: He did pay child support for three months erm I've been
gone since June twenty sixth (.) with four kids to
support.
115
SJR: Would- is there any chance that you'll take him back?
B: There (.) there is no chance [that I will take him back.
No chance
Aud: [eeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee
xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx

What establishes Beth's credibility with the audience as they cheer and applaud at the end of this sequence? There are, I think, two main factors. First, there can be no denying that her version of these events conforms to some general expectations about heterosexual relationships and dysfunctional families. In these terms, it is common sense to assume that the man is more likely to be violent, or at least controlling to the point of demeaning his wife's personality. Equally it is easy to envisage the wronged wife as victim, and Beth paints an affecting picture of herself and her children, with little money and no transport, forced to walk the streets. Closer inspection perhaps suggests that these matters were not entirely one-sided, for Beth admits that she herself contributed to the escalation of the fight. Who said what to whom as far as the son was concerned is also not entirely clear. But these possible inconsistencies do not diminish Beth's credibility because ultimately it is not founded on logic. We can imagine how both parties might have been interrogated in a court of law to try to determine the truth, but that is inappropriate here. The overriding factor is how each guest performs, and the credibility of their performance is to do with the way they produce their talk.

At this level, from the moment she makes her entrance, Beth appears to be making more of an emotional investment, in this occasion, than Dave. He admits to being broken hearted and that his working life is now a mess, but he speaks of this in generalisations and euphemisms: like the 'ups and downs'/'run of bad luck' in lines 23-4, or his gloss on the incidents that led to the split, 'one thing led to another', in lines 27-8. In contrast, Beth embarks on a complex pattern of speech which includes echoes of formal rhetoric, shifts into escalating sequences of argument and, crucially, involves fragments of narrative. It is through these that we can trace her growing credibility with the audience leading up to the final outburst of applause.

The key to understanding this performative factor is, I believe, to examine the moments of interaction between the guests and the studio audience which regularly (every ten lines or so) punctuate the talk. On *Sally*, and in similar talk shows, the studio audience is encouraged (sometimes by prompters in the production team) to express its alignment to what is said, not only through laughter and applause, but also in collective exclamations: 'aah', 'ooooh' and the like (note that 'ooooh' here has a flat or

falling intonation, signifying general disapproval). These occur at particular points in the performance, much in the way that 'clap-trap' operates in political speeches (Atkinson 1984). The term I shall use to define these moments is 'evaluation', which I have derived from the model of oral narrative first proposed by William Labov (Labov 1972). To appreciate how this works, it is necessary briefly to summarise Labov's account, which will also enable a clearer understanding of the structure of narratives in talk shows.

The oral narratives analysed by Labov were produced in sociolinguistic fieldwork interviews with black youths in New York City. Labov observed that some respondents were highly skilled practitioners of this speech genre, especially when telling of topics like 'near-death experiences' or 'the worst fight I ever had'. According to Labov's model, a well-formed oral narrative consists of a series of clauses, minimally comprising (1) a section of 'orientation' in which background details are provided, (2) 'complicating action' which recounts the main events (including, sometimes, dialogue spoken by the characters involved) and (3) a 'coda' which reiterates the overall conclusion to the story (or 'the moral' that it teaches). Also, because oral narratives require one speaker to dominate the floor for their duration, an initial 'story abstract' or preface ('have you heard about x?') may help to clear the way. However, there is more to a good story than a series of details and incidents. For its telling also contains suggestions of how these should be interpreted, what the point of the story is, or (to use an old term from media studies) what its 'preferred reading' might be. This is 'evaluation' and it is scattered throughout the sequence of clauses that comprise the narrative:

That is what we term the *evaluation* of the narrative: the means used by the narrator to indicate the point of the narrative, its *raison d'être*: why it was told and what the narrator is getting at. There are many ways to tell the same story, to make very different points, or to make no point at all. Pointless stories are met (in English) with the withering rejoinder, 'so what?'. Every good narrator is continually warding off this question. (Labov 1972: 366)

And Labov goes on to suggest that evaluation amounts to a 'secondary structure' superimposed, as it were, on the bare bones of the story.

Now, to return to Transcript 30, I want to use this concept of evaluation to analyse the interactions that routinely occur at those moments where (in these 'interview' segments of talk shows) the guests and the studio audience interact. Note that these moments often involve the production of overlapping talk and exclamations. In this way, the audience becomes complicit in the production of evaluations (which is not the case, obviously, in Labov's interview data). In Beth's performance, in particular, there is a pattern where

she says something that triggers an audience response ('oooooh') which Dave simultaneously contests (lines 50-1, 62-3, 71-2, 84-5, 92-3). This is because the audience is warming to Beth's evaluation of her experiences, producing preferred readings which compromise Dave's prior account.

These are not just narrative evaluations in the form described by Labov. In fact Beth does not begin to embark on a narrative until line 78, and then, because of the interruption in lines 84-5, it is briefly diverted into an argumentative escalation sequence which shifts to the second person (lines 86-8). Argument returns again in lines 99-108, so we have to recognise that, in this confrontational context, speakers are not always given the space to produce 'well-formed' narratives according to Labov's model. But again that is not the point: Beth's credibility is not dependent on her being a good story-teller. Rather it is achieved by various sorts of evaluative utterance which add that additional dimension to what she has to report.

Let us look closely at how these utterances are constructed. In the fragment of narrative that starts on line 78 they involve, first, animating something of what was said (in lines 82-3, but this stops short of becoming fully fledged dialogue) and, secondly, a figurative exaggeration of the complicating action (lines 90-4: 'wiped out ... took every dime'). These are classic instances of Labov's narrative evaluation which introduce a dramatic import to the events of the story. However, other evaluations are triggered by the rhetorical delivery of Beth's argument. In lines 50-1, the audience response and Dave's immediate denial interrupts her production of a list of three; and there is substantial audience reaction to the metastatement on line 60, 'he didn't seem to care'. We should also observe that the audience evaluates Dave's contribution precisely at the point where he too produces a list of three (lines 28-9). But this happens less frequently with Dave and he does not add the narrative dimension.

In these ways, talk show talk demonstrates an orientation towards moral evaluation. This is apparent, not only in evaluative statements made by audience members and sometimes by the host (which the next section illustrates) but also in the co-production of evaluative responses, of the sort considered here. Furthermore, to link with our earlier argument, there is an interesting way in which the utterances which trigger these responses reproduce the perspective of 'being ordinary'. This is something of a paradox: what Dave allegedly said to Beth (lines 82-3) is *not* what might be ordinarily expected of a husband talking to his wife. 'Wiping out' a bank account is not an ordinary occurrence. But the fact that these actions transgress the norms of 'being ordinary' is precisely what justifies their moral condemnation. The co-produced moral evaluation thus performs an act of solidarity, in which the reaction of the audience confirms the ordinariness of the victim.

3. Self-transformations

In her overview of the genre, Louann Haarmann has identified three subcategories of talk show. These are (1) the audience discussion format (such as *Kilroy*); (2) social issues in a personal perspective; and (3) personal and social issues as spectacle (Haarmann 2001). In this schema, *Sally* would fall into the second category, but it is debatable whether the issues that it currently deals with can be called 'social'. In fact Haarmann's example of this is *The Oprah Winfrey Show* which, as we noted above, has featured such issues, establishing new areas for debate on American television. As it has developed, however, this subcategory has become increasingly preoccupied with personal problems. There are perhaps some 'social issues' embedded in these, such as gender politics, but, as several critics have observed, both the specific instance of the problem and its suggested resolution are couched in personal, not political, terms (Peck 1995; Cameron 2000).

This 'personal problem' format for talk shows involves two levels of discursive practice. The first level, as we have seen, revolves around moral judgement and the co-production of evaluations by participants and the audience. Thus some participants are cast sympathetically as suffering through no fault of their own, whereas their antagonists are castigated and morally condemned. Even the most tortuous personal problems tend to be judged in this way, so that the evaluations often do little justice to their complexity. However, these serve as a necessary springboard for the next level of activity where both the victims and the perpetrators of such problems are offered the opportunity to 'work them through'. Victims are offered support and counselling. Perpetrators are confronted by the necessity of therapeutic intervention.

In the now substantial academic literature on talk shows this element of self-transformation has been hotly debated. Particularly in work which takes a feminist perspective, there is one view that talk shows are positively therapeutic, and a counter-argument that emphasises their conservative moral agenda (for a summary, see Tolson 2001a). On the one hand there is positive endorsement of talk shows for taking on some feminist concerns, but on the other it is much less clear that they contribute to the empowerment of women (Shattuc 1997; Dovey 2000). Taking a broader view, it seems clear that this kind of talk show is one mechanism for the popularisation of 'therapy talk', alongside the proliferation of self-help and 'life-skills' advice in contemporary popular culture (Cameron 2000). In Dovey's view, this is part of a modern 'neo-liberal' consensus, which links the transformation of the self to a consumerist vision of the 'good life':

There is an astonishing concurrence between dominant ideologies of late twentieth-century capitalism and narratives of personal recovery and growth. Is it any surprise that an economic system that offers us

personal power only through consumer choice should also offer the often unattainable goal of personal liberation through 'quick-fix' psychic solutions ... Narratives of personal change are the only narratives that the television of neo-liberalism can offer. (2000: 121)

In this way, some of the critique of talk shows connects with Fairclough's argument about the 'authority of the consumer'. It is suggested that an ideology of consumerism is driving both the increasing 'conversationalisation' of public discourse and the narrative focus of much 'ordinary television'.

Dovey also points out that in what he calls 'first person media', the complexity of the therapeutic process is highly condensed. However, his notion of the 'quick-fix' solution does not really apply to personal problems in talk shows. Of course, it is evidently the case that a televisual format of this kind cannot fully display the personal sensitivities of counselling or therapy, so that the possibility of self-transformation has to be presented in a symbolic form. On many talk shows, their problems having been morally evaluated, this takes the form of offering participants the opportunity for counselling or therapy to which they are expected to show a personal commitment. The mechanism by which this commitment is performed is very interesting, from a discourse-analytical point of view.

For example, at the end of *I want you back!* viewers are introduced to Sally's 'after-care specialist', Pat Ferrari. Beth and Dave are shown in the backstage area, still arguing with each other, when Ferrari makes her entrance with their teenage daughter Crystal, who has previously been featured in the show. The importance and necessity of counselling is taken for granted, but Ferrari transfers this from the parents to the child. It is now Crystal, not Beth, who is the ultimate victim of the marital break-up, and both parents are expected to demonstrate their commitment to her welfare. In fact Crystal, who appears to be traumatised by the whole experience, fails to respond to Ferrari's insistent offers of 'after-care', but her parents, or at least Dave, understand what is required. To show willing, Dave performs a gesture of hugging Crystal, simultaneously expressing his love. And despite the fact that Crystal shows no enthusiasm at all for this, Ferrari nevertheless gives it her full approval:

Transcript 31

B: For five years I begged you (.) to go to counselling with me and to get some help. And you ignored me I kept telling you over and over again that you were pushing me out of the [door]

[PF enters backstage area with B & D's daughter Crystal]

S PF: [All right hold on no more no more arguing here. Here we go here we go okay now, if you want to hug your dad hug your dad. Dad if you want to give her a hug

- and kiss hug and kiss her.
 10 [to parents] She's hurting now and she feels you know she's very upset and I think you need to listen to her.
 [to Crystal] Okay it's okay [Crystal shakes head] You're hurt [to Dave] she's hurt.
 15 D: I love you Crystal. I never wanted this to come between you and I. You know you're always my little girl.
 PF: Hug her, hug her, show your feelings
 D: [hugs Crystal] I love you baby
 PF: That's it that's it. That's beautiful

In talk shows, therapeutic self-transformation is condensed into gestures and statements of this kind. The statements function as 'speech acts' of the classical kind, defined by J. L. Austin as 'performatives' (Austin 1962). That is to say, Dave's statement in line 17 is not reducible to an account of his feelings; it is, especially when allied to this gesture, designed to perform an action which is intended to effect a change in the immediate circumstances. It is a way of 'doing things with words'. In the typology of speech acts introduced by Searle (1976) this is a 'declaration' (in this case, obviously, of love) and the evidence that it is treated as such is provided by Ferrari's response. This is not a statement to be questioned or further discussed but simply applauded: 'That's it ... That's beautiful'.

Speech act theory is a complicated, much-debated area of pragmatic philosophy (Levinson 1983). For instance, there are arguments which question Austin's original thesis that 'performatives' are a special class of linguistic utterance, for as CA demonstrates, all talk involves social action of some kind. Nevertheless, Austin's original concept of the 'speech act' does seem to apply very readily to the specific type of statement that is required in a talk show, when self-transformation is at stake. The participant is expected to enter, in a demonstration of personal commitment, a kind of contract, that he or she is open to that course of action. The performance of this commitment is then taken as an occasion for applause. To return to Searle, Dave's declaration here also functions as a 'commissive', in that it commits him to try to mend his broken relationship with his daughter.

In Britain, the *locus classicus* for this discursive practice is the long-running talk show *Trisha*. Trisha Goddard herself is a trained counsellor, so she combines the roles of Raphael and Ferrari, changing her footing when appropriate from lay discourse to expertise (Brunvatne and Tolson 2001). Routinely, there seem to be two kinds of therapy talk on offer in *Trisha*, both in the show itself and through its 'after-care'. One form, typically applied to personal tragedies and unconventional (but supportable) lifestyles, involves 'coming to terms' with the problem or the prejudice. Applause is given to statements of acceptance in segments of this kind. At the same time, self-transformation is always on the agenda for dysfunctional

relationships and lifestyles, and here Trisha, with the support of the studio audience, lectures her guests from her position of expertise.

Transcript 32 contains the final moments of a segment of *Trisha* entitled *I hate having sex with my husband*. This features Janice, a middle-aged woman, who complains that she has lost all desire for her husband Gary, since he has gained excessive weight. Interestingly, and despite its title expressing her point of view, this segment presents another instance where the audience changes sides, from initial hostility towards Gary to some expression of sympathy. Gary displays a sense of humour, which triggers audience laughter and prompts some statements of support for his characterisation of his wife's criticism as 'nagging'. However, he also, crucially, and under Trisha's interrogation, switches to a serious recognition of his unsustainable lifestyle and makes the commitment to change. Here, the critical speech act is finally delivered on line 90, and it is greeted by extended audience cheering and applause:

Transcript 32

- J: You're making a joke of this. It hurts. You don't understand what I'm going [through=]
 T: [What do you mean it hurts?]
 5 J: that = when I see you like
 G: I know what I look like
 J: What has the medical people told [ya
 G: [gestures] [nag nag nag nag nag [keep on and on
 10 J: [no what [has what has
 And: [hahahahahxxxxxxxxxxxxx
 T: Hang on just a minute. Let's get- yes what did you want to say?
 15 W1: I think what you've obviously got here is a self-perpetuating problem because you're comfort eating and you're not helping him because you do keep nagging at him I think [the pract=
 J: [well it's the only way I can get through he doesn't listen
 20 W1: = () to break [that to break
 G: that cycle you both need=
 W1: that way (.) It don't work that way [It doesn't work
 25 W1: compromise. = to work together and
 J: He won't listen
 W1: You perhaps need to cut down on your weight by going to a dietician or something and you need to support him through that and help [him. If you work together then
 30 it'll work.
 And: xx
 J: [I've told him I will support ya

- T: Erm, yeh hello
- W2: Er (.) Janice you're obviously not happy with yourself (.) that's why you're taking it out on your husband.
- 35 J: [That's why he's comfort eating
[No I'm okay with myself (.) I'm okay. But I'm not happy with him.
- W2: No. You're no happy with yourself first. You gotta look at yourself first that's why you're taking it out on him that's why he's [comfort eating
- 40 T: [Could that be [part of it?
G: [That's right
- 45 W2: When you come on stage you know (.) not being (.) offensive or anything but you looked (.) old
Aud: leheheheh
- J: [I am old I don't mind admitting it I am old
- W2: You looked an old lady and did you say your husband's forty five?
- 50 J: Yeh
W: Well I-I'm nearly forty five you know you know and [looking at you
- J: [Well would you like to go out with him? Would you like him?
- 55 G: [You would eh eh eh (.) Give me your number and we will
Aud: [yeeeeaaaaahxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx
W2: Size is irrelevant you know you married him you should love [him=
- J: [yeh but I can't take this no more
- 60 W2: whatever size he is look in his eyes his eyes'll never change
G: [gestures] look in my eyes
Aud: hahahahahaxxxx
- T: Now look (.) Gary I suspect what is driving your wife bananas is that you don't take it seriously now I wanna [remind=
- G: [Oh I do take it seriously
T: = wanna remind you you did have a heart scare a [couple of years ago
- 70 G: [yes I did
T: You've got bad asthma. You're having to sleep upright because of stomach ulcers there are a lot of health problems and they're probably increasing
- G: That is right
- 75 T: Now (.) away from what you call the nagging [G: mhm] I know when you talked to our producers I think you actually understa:nd all of those problems and you're trapped in a bit of a lifestyle [way of living
- G: [that's right I am yeh
- 75 T: You recognise everything that that Janice is telling you but you don't need to hear it in the way she's telling it
G: I don't like to hear it twenty four seven twenty four hours of the day non stop every day [every minute
- J: [You're not with me
- 85 you're not with me twenty four hours a day
G: Well when I come home from work I am

[42 seconds omitted: Trisha makes plea to Gary's workmates]

T: We'll put him in contact with the dietician [G: okay] but there's no point us doing that

G: If I don't stick to it

90 T: If you don't stick to it
G: But I will stick to it
T: You will stick to it
G: yeh
Aud: Yeeeeeeeeaaaaahxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx

It is interesting that Gary's gesture of commitment is jointly performed with Trisha, through a sequence of six turns (lines 88–93). Initially, Gary completes Trisha's sentence (line 89) and in so doing shifts the focus of her lecture back to himself, in the first person. Trisha co-operatively recycles this intervention, whereupon Gary delivers his promise (line 91). Again Trisha responds with a co-operative prompt for Gary to confirm this commitment (line 93). The audience reaction is equivalent to Ferrari's approval of Gary's gesture in Transcript 31. It confirms this as the symbolic moment, performed here in an interactive ritual, to which this whole segment of the show is geared.

It is also apparent that the studio audience is playing a substantial role. Not only do they collectively react and evaluate particular turns, but also two women in the audience offer their own diagnostic observations. There is a space in the programme at this point for audience members to act as quasi-experts, and I have chosen this extract in particular because it illustrates very clearly what this form of expertise entails. It is Trisha herself who spells out the medical consequences of a bad diet, with which Gary can only concur. The women in the audience, however, understand at a more fundamental level, the communication problems that underlie Gary's recourse to 'comfort eating'. For the first woman (W1) this is a self-perpetuating problem that can only be tackled by 'working together' (cue audience applause, line 31). This is followed by W2's direct contradiction of Janice's self-presentation, in the suggestion that she too has problems that she is failing to confront. This then, despite Janice's protests, becomes the generally accepted view.

What both these women are demonstrating here is the ordinary person's expertise in 'good communication'. This is a theory of communication which can be readily applied to cases like this because it is taken to be the root cause of the problem. It is a theory brilliantly dissected, with reference to the talk show *Donahue*, by Donal Carbaugh (1988) and subsequently related to wider developments in corporate and popular culture by Deborah Cameron (2000). At its heart is a belief that better communication improves relationships because this allows for the expression of the 'true self' (and as W2 suggests (line 60) this is visible in the eyes, as the window to the soul). Conversely, bad practices of communication (like nagging) not only act as

an obstacle to self-development, they also indicate that their perpetrators themselves have problems: they are not acknowledging their true feelings or are not 'happy with themselves' (line 34).

There are three consequences of the application of this popular theory of 'good communication' to talk shows like *Sally* and *Trisha*. First, it is now clear why these shows require performative declarations, promises and the like – this is because such speech acts provide evidence of 'good communication' starting to happen. They are a form of utterance which directly implicates the 'self' in a first-person commitment. Secondly, and this is especially clear in the arguments made by W2, 'good communication' is also tied to the moral framework for doing evaluations. Janice's problem with herself is related to her failing as a wife; if she can come to terms with this and learn to communicate better, she will also be fulfilling her moral responsibilities (lines 57–8).

But the third consequence, as I have indicated, is that this kind of talk show permits ordinary people to demonstrate a form of expertise. This is no doubt why these shows are so popular: they provide a daily dossier of 'problems' where precisely this form of analysis applies. Indeed one might say that the problems and the analysis support each other in a circular fashion. Problem? Bad communication. Solution? Better communication. This is what 'talk' means on talk shows. On these shows, ordinariness is not about being humble or mundane, or even making a point based on experience. Rather, it is about being proved correct. For the display of a commitment to self-transformation confirms the prior moral evaluation, as both levels of discursive practice confirm the ordinary theory of 'good communication'.

4. Talk as spectacle

The theory of 'good communication' can also perhaps begin to explain the attractions of that ultimate paradox: the talk show in which key moments of the talk are inaudible. On an edition of *The Jerry Springer Show*, entitled *I will break up your marriage*, Gina confronts Misty, who is having an affair with her husband. Misty says that the husband John has told her he is not married, but it turns out that he has been lying to her. This revelation, however, is only a small part of the show; much more significant and dramatic are the physical fights that occur as guests take the stage. When Misty first appears (line 54) Gina rises from her seat, removes her spectacles and advances towards her with apparently violent intent. This is of course a routine, and bouncers immediately appear to pull the two women apart. Meanwhile what they are saying, or shouting at each other, is either edited or bleeped out, or is drowned by the cheering and chanting of the audience:

Transcript 33

- JS: Hey welcome to the show my guests today say they will
stop at nothing to destroy a loved one's marriage (.)
Aud: ooooooh
JS: And they're here to tell them no matter what you do I
will break up your marriage
Aud: ooooooh
JS: Please meet Gina. She says her husband met his mistress
on a Tuesday left her and their new born baby and was
living with her by Thursday (.)
Aud: aaaaah
JS: What's going on?
G: Well (.) I'm here I'm not here to talk I'm here to
[edited out]
Aud: YEEERAAAAAHHHHHHH JERREREE JERREREE JERREREE JERREREE
xxxxwoahhhhh
JS: But this (.) this is a talk show
Aud: hhhhhhh
JS: Ah okay first of all when er (.) how long have you been
with this man?
G: About two years [JS: t-] we've been married two months
JS: But you've been together two years=
[we have a five month
old baby together
JS: month old baby
G: Yes we do
Aud: aaaaah
JS: How did she get into the picture?
G: I guess he met her at work (.) the pig that she is
Aud: ooooooh
JS: So he's now with [his mistress
G: [He's with his pig yes
Aud: hhhhhhh
JS: Ah where does he work at a zoo? I mean
Aud: hahahahahaxxxxxxxxxxyeeeh[xxxxxxxxxxxx
G: No eheheheh
JS: [Do you still (.) do you still
have (.) but does he still [are you still
G: [He still loves me (.) He says
it all the time
JS: D-d-are you still intimate with him?
G: (.) He wants to be. He says it all the time to me
JS: He wants to have sex [G: yeh] with you still [G: mm] even
though he's living with her now?
G: yeh
Aud: oooooh
G: He says he's using her (.) He's coming back home to me
and his son (.) Now I'm going I'm here to give him an
ultimatum he either comes home with me or he stays and
lays with [bleep] pig
Aud: YEEAHMOOAHxxxxxxxxxxxx [xxxx
JS: [All right well here she is

55 **Miscy**
 Aud: AAAAHWOOOOxxxxxxx
 [scuffles, bleeps etc]
 Aud: JERREE JERREE JERREE JERREE JERREE JERREE JERREE
 xxxxxxxoooooh
 JS: Ah how long have you been with this fella?
 M: Erm we've been together a month
 60 JS: A month?
 M: Mhm
 JS: Did he tell you he's with her? What does he tell you
 about her?
 M: Erm he tells me he hates her and that he loves me and he
 65 even denies being married to her
 Aud: oooooh
 G: [shaky voice] Then why is he coming back? [edited out] he
 loves me [edited out] back home
 JS: (.) What do you want what do you want to say to her?
 70 G: And he is married [bleep] you can go [bleep]
 Aud: [bleep] xxxxxxxxxx [oooooooooAH
 G: ()
 M: If he loved you then he wouldn't be with me
 75 Aud: yeeeeeaaah

There is a wonderfully ironic moment here when in response to Gina's statement that she is 'not here to talk' but to do something we are prevented from hearing (line 13). Jerry reminds her that 'this is a talk show' (line 16). But what kind of talk show exactly? Clearly this has some of the personal confrontation and familial conflict found in other kinds of show, and some of the audience response is appropriately evaluative (lines 27, 30, 46). However, there is another level of interaction where the participants are functioning at the very edge of articulacy, threatening to violate the norms of ordinary conversation, and where audience reaction takes the form of cheering and ritual chanting. The transgression from talking to fighting transforms the occasion into a spectacle of confrontation. At these moments it is not important that we hear precisely what is said. It is enough that we witness the spectacle of verbal and physical violence.

There has been some debate about the possible therapeutic value of this kind of confrontation talk. But if this is a kind of therapy, it clearly does not require the intervention of the host as a counsellor or provider of 'after-care'. Rather as Greg Myers has noted, the spectacular events of *The Jerry Springer Show* are subsumed into the homily Jerry delivers, as his 'final thoughts' (Myers 2001). This is recorded after the show and only addresses the domestic viewer. On the show itself, Jerry does not intervene, and Myers takes his statement 'I'm out of it; you guys argue' as indicative of his overall stance. Myers also notes, however, that the show provides an environment for emotive 'flooding out', where emotions seemingly over-

whelm the speaker. Lunt and Stenner (2005) have suggested that the show constitutes an 'emotional public sphere' where, in a safe environment guaranteed by the presence of the bouncers, the inarticulate guests experience 'a controlled decontrolling of emotional controls' (2005: 77).

Certainly *The Jerry Springer Show* seems dedicated to demonstrating the difficulties of ordinary talk. Its moments of high drama are impossible to transcribe with a guarantee of accuracy as any vestige of a 'systematics' of turn-taking breaks down. And if that were not bad enough, the editors then insist on removing utterances (obscenities) which they consider unbroadcastable. It is as if the emotional states of these participants cannot be put into words, or, as Gina says, they are past talking. Surely, however, and this is underestimated in some academic accounts, it is a key factor in the show's appeal that it is not meant to be taken seriously? Jerry's urbane and ironic persona confirms this. Jane Shattuc has made an interesting interpretation of the generic influences here:

These shows deny restraint; they are more extravagantly theatrical and self-conscious than any nineteenth century melodrama. They are closer to the highly controlled game shows or World Wrestling Federation (WWF) matches in their excessive style, emphasis on ritual, and, most important, audience participation. Roland Barthes writes that the attraction of wrestling was once the 'spectacle of excess' evoked by means of grandiloquent gestures and violent contact... Like wrestling, talk shows celebrate the self-consciousness of the drama where the performance breaks through the orienting boundaries of stage theatrics into the audience. (Shattuc 1997: 159)

Shattuc provides detailed evidence of a shift in the production format for talk shows. The emphasis on spectacular confrontation in shows like *Jerry Springer* and *Ricki Lake* was designed, in the mid-1990s, to appeal to a new audience demographic. To the traditional target audience, defined principally as 'housewives', was added a new conception of youth attracted to 'the pleasures of youthful rule breaking' and the 'sheer pleasure of breaking social taboos' (139). Now, having identified some of the key ingredients of youth radio in this same period, we are able to add a bit more substance to Shattuc's point. For it is not simply that the behaviour exhibited by the participants is excessive, and it is not just that it has a melodramatic appeal; it is also that the programme is prepared to challenge the communicative ethos of broadcasting. Like zoo radio, there are aspects of the production that appear to be unintelligible, or perversely not intended to be heard. On this level, the edits and the bleeps are not simply there to disguise obscenities – they add to the entertainment.

It can also be argued I think, that *The Jerry Springer Show* offers a spectacle of 'bad communication'. This flatters the audience, who recognise

its limitations. Shattuc talks about the high level of self-consciousness in this form of drama; I think this revolves around an awareness that the participants in shows like this are flouting the norms of ordinary talk. The knowingness of the youthful audience for these shows extends to recognising the bad acting, speculating about 'fake guests', and generally feeling superior to the 'trailer-park' behaviour on display. Perhaps this is a dubious attraction, and it has been widely criticised as 'trash TV'. But it can also be argued that the spectacle of bad communication provides an extreme version of the general effect of talk shows, because the display of dysfunctional and deviant behaviour confirms 'being ordinary' as our everyday normality.

8

Celebrity Talk

1. Forms of celebrity

As he begins to outline the conversational practices that constitute 'being ordinary' Sacks identifies a category of people for whom this is at best problematic, perhaps impossible:

Now it is the case that there are people who are entitled to have their lives be an epic. We have designed a series of storyable people, places and objects, and they stand as something different from us. It may be that in pretty much every circle there is somebody who is the subject of all neat observations, as there are, for society in general, a collection of people about whom detailed reports are made that not merely would never be ventured about others, but would never be thought of about others. The way in which Elizabeth Taylor turned around is something noticeable and reportable. The way in which your mother turned around is something unseeable, much less tellable. (1984: 419)

So it is not that you do not see your mother turning round, it is that this action, being ordinary, does not constitute a topic of conversation. In contrast, the actions of film stars, of the stature of Elizabeth Taylor, are always, in Sacks's term, 'tellable'; and it is the conversational practice of 'reporting' that confirms this noticeability.

Such distinctions, between the ordinary and the 'epic', are firmly rooted in the literature of media studies, particularly in discussions of film stars. In this account, the status of stars is confirmed by their 'charisma' (Dyer 1979) sustained first by a finite number of screen appearances and second by our knowledge of their highly glamorous and extravagant lifestyles. It is the job of the subsidiary publicity industry to circulate reports and images of this, as well as to use star images in the promotion of films (Ellis 1982). Further research has demonstrated the fascination of fans with this glamorous imagery, heightened, for much of the last century, by a perception of their distance from the deprivations of everyday life (Stacey 1994). For many commentators, stars as celebrities have been taken to personify the 'American