
Media Rituals

A critical approach

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Chapter 7

Mediated self-disclosure *Before and after the Internet*

It's as if in order to speak to those close to them, it's necessary [for them] to pass through TV.

(French talk-show producer, quoted in Mehl 1996: 57)

A bright agent could do worse than checking out the following five top blogs ...

(*The Guardian* (Online section), 23 August 2001: 4)

The recent growth in the media's, and particularly television's, role as a site for self-disclosure is striking, and has attracted considerable attention.¹ It is hardly surprising that some have seen here a throwback to 'the medieval confessional box' (Harley 1992: 3). But, as one of the more subtle commentators on this phenomenon has argued, television's confessional 'ritual' is quite different from earlier forms (White 1992a). The relationship between the meanings of self-disclosure and technological form is a subtle one, and goes on changing with the expanded possibilities for self-disclosure on the Internet. In this chapter, I want to explore not so much the details of what individuals disclose through the media, but rather what a ritual analysis adds to our understanding of these forms of self-disclosure. A ritual analysis can cut across and help us rethink from a broader sociological perspective, otherwise indecisive debates about the meaning of self-disclosure in our supposedly 'confessional culture.'

In general terms, it might not seem surprising that more and more people are revealing private aspects of themselves through the media. After all, recent decades have seen a great increase in the mediation of everyday life, making us all familiar with acting for, and with, distant others through mediation (Livingstone and Lunt

1994: 5; Slevin 2000: 159; Thompson 1995: 100–9, 175): why should not the implied boundaries around private space be altered, not only to import new information from the public sphere (cf. Meyrowitz 1985), but also to let out once private information into the public arena? There is a broader sociological dimension to this: as our everyday experience becomes more and more separated, or 'sequestered', from that of others, so the media are an increasingly important site where experience can be shared (Ciddens 1991: 156): why then should private experience not be 'hooped through' zones of public disclosure? We return to this argument later, but first let me emphasise a basic point: that the price of this expansion of the boundaries of private experience, if indeed that is what is occurring, is to submit that experience to the power dimensions of the mediation process. The symbolic landscape in which people's mediated confessions occur is neither simple nor even.

We will look at a broad range of mediated self-disclosure: although I will concentrate on television talk shows where guests are required directly or indirectly to reveal something important about their private lives, I will also touch on cases apparently more under the control of those making the disclosures (such as the *Video Diaries* and *Video Nation* series in the UK in the 1990s), and the increasing disclosure of self through text and images on the Internet (even this is to select drastically: much recent 'reality TV' discussed in Chapter 6 can be read from this angle). My approach, as before, will concentrate on questions of form rather than content. Too close a focus on the contents of individual disclosures risks missing the most puzzling aspect of this whole landscape: its links to the ritually reinforced notion that the media provide a 'central' space where it makes sense to disclose publicly aspects of one's life that one might not otherwise disclose to anyone.

A formal analysis cuts across another important dimension of self-disclosure: the general spread of the languages of confession and therapy (White 1992a; Mehl 1996), and its implications for family and social relations. But the advantage of this structural approach is to show what is wrong with two other approaches that collapse prematurely the power relations involved in mediated self-disclosure: first, an unqualified celebration of such self-disclosure as the irruption of popular voices into a previously closed public domain (Shattuc 1994, on early 1990s US talk shows), a position that is often close to a functionalist reading of the public spaces created by these shows; and second, an outright dismissal of mediated self-disclosure as a collapse into narcissism of earlier spaces of public representation; Robins (1995a: 139–43) comes close to this in his discussion of 'karaoke TV'. Mediated self-disclosure is a great deal more ambiguous than that, as some excellent recent studies of talk-show production (Dovey 2000; Gamson 1998; Grindstaff 1997) demonstrate. The underlying reason for this ambiguity is that, like any media ritual, self-disclosure takes place within the uneven power relations of the media's ritual space.

DOING STRANGE THINGS ON TELEVISION

When I first saw an episode of the *Jerry Springer Show*, with couples rowing violently before a studio audience, I was physically shaken; I sweated and had goosebumps. A naive reaction, perhaps, linked to the fact that personally I don't like arguments. But Aristotle's diagnosis of tragedy in terms of 'pity and terror' also came to mind.

This might open up an obvious link to ritual analysis, since Aristotle's theory of catharsis has founded countless analyses of ancient Greek tragedy as a ritual process. As Roger Silverstone (1999: 101) has argued, we can interpret the talk show text as a symbolic reversal (cf. Babcock 1978) through which community is reaffirmed by the display and eventual closing off of its opposite, conflict. But there are two paradoxes in that approach. First, as just mentioned, there is not necessarily much ritual intensity for viewers of such shows (watching for the hundredth time); at best, such shows would represent routine, liminoid forms, which carry intensity because of their rhetorical claims to restore community. In any case, this reading of the talk-show text takes no account of the process undergone by the performers: where is the evidence that to them the process is one of symbolic reversal, let alone community reaffirmation or (Shattuc 1994: 169, 1999: 223) 'carnavalesque'? There is, of course, another, very different ritual interpretation to be considered, whose implications are not affirmative: the ritual of degradation and excommunication (Carey 1998). In any case, we need to start not from textual analysis but from the social process that self-disclosure on such programmes constitutes.

The social process of self-disclosure

What is at stake in these shows from the perspective of the performers, both those who disclose themselves and those who engineer the disclosure? This is surely very different from what is at stake in watching such programmes, although talk show performers may be largely drawn from regular viewers of the genre.² If so, it can hardly be that the performers are unaware of the constraints under which they will perform in the talk-show format. Any distance between viewers and performers is not a simple matter of knowledge; indeed it may only be to some viewers that talk shows seem strange, in which case the genre divides its potential audience as much as it unites it.

Something more fundamental is at stake in these programmes, I suggest, which relates to the very basis of media ritual. Before we examine this in specifically ritual terms, let us recall a point made by Joshua Meyrowitz in his still highly insightful analysis of television's consequences for social interaction. We will not grasp the workings of television within the social process, he argues, if we look on the level of this or that person's behaviour in particular locations; instead it is 'the overall

pattern of situated behaviours' (Meyrowitz 1985: 42) – what particular people do here and what they do not do there – that we need to understand. If so, then a clue to the significance of talk shows may be the way participation in them is patterned: what is the relation between those likely to perform on the *Jerry Springer Show* and those not, and how is this relation linked to wider relations of power, and particularly media power?

This requires a more subtle analysis of the social process constituted by talk shows. Two recent analyses of talk shows have advanced our understanding greatly. First, Joshua Gamson's (1998) book on the performance of non-mainstream sexual identities on US talk shows makes clear that, whatever the artificiality and indeed cruelty of such shows and their attendant ethical problems, part of their significance for performers derives from the opportunity they represent, against the odds, to be seen before a public audience, to emerge from invisibility:

It is because of the cynical use of 'real people', people who feel themselves to be disrespected and in need of television affirmation, that talk shows have offered the most diverse visibility for gay and lesbian and bisexual and transgender people available [in public life].

(Gamson 1998: 215, original emphasis)

This is not to say that these television performances simply extend a democratic public space, since there is just as much scope through talk shows for the expansion of bigotry as of mutual understanding (Gamson 1998: 14, 221). The point rather is that the programmes make sense for many performers, as a means of dealing with their normal invisibility: they are 'struggles of visibility' (Thompson 1995: 247), even if they are also 'visibility traps' (Gamson 1998: 212). 'Visibility' here means being seen before the social gaze, before a representative sample of the social body.

Laura Grindstaff in an article on the production of daytime talk shows develops this point even more forcibly. The viewer/performer gap already noted is not, she argues, accidental since it is based in the social differentials that make these shows' performers distinctive. Although she does not offer a detailed analysis of their social backgrounds, Grindstaff convincingly argues that the attractiveness of appearing in a talk show is connected with certain people's usual exclusion from media representation. The fact that certain people appear on talk shows:

is less a comment on how trashy they are and more a comment on the exclusivity of television and the limited access of ordinary people to media representation.

(Grindstaff 1997: 193).

'Ordinariness', of course, is not here a natural term (cf. Chapter 2), but directly linked to the social power that television constitutes, and how people are positioned in relation to that power: 'appearing on national television is not part of the daily routine for ordinary people. This is in part what makes them ordinary' (Grindstaff 1997: 177). Which is why you wouldn't expect a *celebrity* to appear on the show and reveal themselves; the power and draw of the programme is linked directly to wider questions of symbolic inequality (Grindstaff 1997: 195–6).

Strategies of excess?

I want to emphasise here that I am not discounting the importance of other readings of the contemporary talk show (or indeed self-disclosure on the Web) which foreground the uses to which these spaces are put to challenge important forms of cultural and social exclusion (for example, linked to differences in sexuality). It is certainly arguable that, in particular circumstances of oppression, the fact of getting your story on television outweighs any power dimensions of the medium through which you must speak. I take seriously therefore the argument (Sharruc 1999) that, by permitting sexual stories that many regarded as 'bad taste', the 1990s US talk show was a space of therapeutic significance for many participants and often also a space of highly knowing performance that was well aware of the limits of the form.

These issues, in themselves, raise questions of power. Within the context of particular cultural and social conflicts (recalling de Certeau's (1984) fundamental distinction between 'strategies' and 'tactics'), these actions could be seen as strategic interventions, even if relative to the talk show form, they were merely 'tactical'. My priority, however, in this book are the questions of power condensed within the ritual forms of mediated self-disclosure themselves, rather than these broader cultural negotiations.³

SELF-DISCLOSURE ZONES: A RITUAL ANALYSIS

Part of the overall meaning of performing on talk shows (notwithstanding the obvious range of detailed reasons people give, which are linked to what precisely they reveal of themselves) is as a crossing over into a rarely entered space of public attention. As Priest (1996: 81) puts it, to appear on a talk show is to 'step in' to a valued place. Priest's insight is not new but draws on the argument long ago of Lazarsfeld and Merton (1969) that appearing on television confers status, the status Neal Gabler (2000: 187) calls 'the sanctification of the television camera'. We begin to see here the ritual basis of self-disclosure on television. The talk show is assumed to be a valued place, because it is a media place⁴ to enter it is to cross a *category* boundary from 'ordinary world' to 'media world', marked by the phrase 'to step into'. These assumptions

are only a naturalised version of the real inequalities in society's distribution of its symbolic resources. But it is precisely such wider resonances that characterise media rituals: media rituals, such as the talk-show form, are formal means of making media power seem natural.

The talk show, then, involves a ritual boundary: it is a 'rite of institution' (Bourdieu 1991) which confirms that boundary's significance and legitimacy, regardless of whether it effects any permanent transformation of the performer. The 'ordinary person' may, or may not, succeed in getting recategorised as a 'media person' by appearing on a talk show: generally not. But this does not alter the ritual status of the process, which is based on the unequal status of the 'ordinary person' and the media institution. We cannot understand talk shows unless we see that people perform on them under pressures that are connected to the meaning the media/ordinary boundary has to them, which relates, in turn, to their own variable symbolic capital.

Let's now make this point more specific by showing how in a number of ways the media/ordinary boundary is negotiated and reaffirmed in talk shows. It is necessary here to cut across the obvious variety within the talk show genre: from the studio discussion format focused on the meeting between 'ordinary people' describing and debating their experiences with relevant 'experts' (in the UK, BBC's *Kilroy* and ITV's *The Time The Place*), to shows involving more direct personal conflict between friends and family, but with a strong therapeutic element (in the US, *Oprah* and *Jan Rivers*, and, in the UK, *Trisha*), to shows whose main focus is the staged confrontation between guests (*The Jerry Springer Show*).

These programmes, of course, vary in their detailed format and, even within shows with an explicit therapeutic content, there are variations between types of therapeutic discourse (Brunvatne and Tolson 2001). None of these differences, however, affect the underlying ritual form in which I am interested: the fact that it makes sense to enter television space, before a studio and domestic audience, to reveal aspects of one's life that until then were largely, if not entirely, private. The principles that emerge are crucial for understanding why and how the media in general can function as a site for important self-disclosures.

The ritual of confession

First, there is a range of evidence that the media/ordinary boundary is present, and reworked in various ways, where people disclose themselves in the media. If those who appear in the shows and also watch them are 'ordinary people who watch television' (interviewee, quoted in Livingstone and Lunt 1994: 119), they have a very different status from those who host or produce the shows. We should not underestimate the fierceness with which this division may be underlined in talk-show production. Take this striking comment from a producer:

I'm always amazed – *amazed* – that these little people from their trailer parks don't totally freak out [i.e. go silent] on camera more often.

(quoted in Grindstaff 1997: 179, original emphasis)

Gamson also reports how television producers may be well aware of the class differential between themselves and the performers (or studio audience):

It's like you go [as a talk-show guest] from never leaving town – like Houston was the biggest city they ever went to, and some people had never been there – and it's like you're [as a talk-show producer] offering them this vision of grandeur, and [your aim] is to exploit them.

(quoted in Gamson 1998: 83)

In a similar spirit, one producer of a UK television phone-in show casually referred, in conversation with me, to those who spoke on the show as 'pond life'.

A similar sense of boundary emerges, less brutally, in another producer's recollection of the gratitude expressed to him by audience members just for the fact of them *being there* in the studio:

A lot of people in the studio audience would say, 'Thank you so much. Thank you, this is the first time that like we're going to be seen on TV'.

(quoted in Gamson 1998: 62)

Those who go on shows recognise it as an experience that is 'out of the ordinary' (Svendsen 2001: 322). More than that, it may be seen by them as an act of *social* significance:

I felt like I had contributed something to society.

(guest on *Donatue*, quoted in Priest 1996: 74)

In my down times, and when I think I'm useless... I think 'But wait, I've touched these people [i.e. people out in the social world]':

(guest on *Donatue*, quoted in Priest 1996: 74)

The media/ordinary boundary is present also, in a displaced form, in standard notions of how people should perform on such shows. It is a cliché of media discourse noted by a number of writers that, to appear as significant agents in the media world, 'ordinary people' have to do 'extraordinary things'; they have to be 'over the top'.⁶ This is hardly surprising, since the terms 'ordinary' and 'extraordinary' are just another way of expressing the media/ordinary hierarchy. The boundary is

just translated into prescriptive terms: if you're 'ordinary', then 'of course' you can't expect to get on the media by 'just' being ordinary, or as another producer quoted by Gansson put it: 'if you behave the way I'm asking, you're more likely to be on TV' (Gansson 1998: 87).

It is hardly surprising, then, that in talk shows, just as in the less intensely performative zone of reality TV, the ritual category of the 'media person' is preserved. This does not require anything as crude, or definitive, as talk show guests becoming, or regarding themselves as, celebrities. It comes out more subtly in performers' sense that they and their story have somehow been validated or certified (cf. Priest 1995: 163; 1996: 74); they 'matter' now because they have been on television. Although the format of talk shows (programmes with a cast that changes each week, and, indeed, before and after the advertising break) militates against any stable form of celebrity for performers, the ritualised boundary that *underlies* celebrity is clearly reinforced. We can reverse Dovey's comment that on reality television 'everyday life has become the stage upon which the new rituals of celebrity are performed' (2000: 104), since the talk show 'stage' is the media's version (more or less artificial) of 'everyday life'. Instead of postmodern television deconstructing the authenticity of the traditional media celebrity (Tolson 1991), the forms of celebrity have become not less, but more, pervasive.

Self-disclosure on talk shows is not, in any case, a simple transition from 'ordinary' to 'media' person, because it results from a real, antecedent situation of conflict. Just as important, therefore, as the effect of the media/ordinary boundary on the person disclosing is the effect of the ritual on what is said, its transformation from something merely personal into something special, something representative. It is here that the talk show's status as media ritual shapes the meaning of the act of disclosure, its very possibility as a meaningful act for a private person to perform.

The connection, specifically, between ritual and self-disclosure was expressed powerfully, although outside any broader theory of ritual, by Michel Foucault in his analysis of confession in Volume 1 of *The History of Sexuality*:

The confession is a ritual of discourse in which the speaking subject is also the subject of the statement; it is also a ritual that unfolds within a power relationship; for one does not confess without the presence (or virtual presence) of a partner who is not simply the interlocutor but the authority who requires the confession, prescribes it and appreciates it, and intervenes in order to judge, punish, forgive, console and reconcile; a ritual in which the truth is corroborated by the obstacles and resistances it has had to surmount in order to be formulated; and finally a ritual in which the expression alone independently of its external consequences, produces intrinsic modifications in the person who articulates it: it exonerates, redeems, and purifies him ...

(Foucault 1981a: 61–2, my emphasis)

Mimi White was the first to apply Foucault's insights to television confessionals (1992a: 7–8), but she rightly pointed out that the television form brings very different consequences from a confession before a priest, doctor or psychoanalyst. First, the talk-show audience is multiple: it encompasses those on stage, including the host, the studio audience and the assumed domestic audience. Second, the structures within which confession is acceptable and permitted are different and closely linked with the economic and formal imperatives of the televisual medium. This is undoubtedly true.

Even so, Foucault's analysis goes to the heart of the ritual power of mediated confessions in three respects. First, the confession gains meaning and strength ('is corroborated' in Foucault's words) from the resistance it encounters, that is, from the difficulties that attend it (including the stress of appearing before a large audience, which is assumed also to be a significant audience). Second, as in all ritual, its performance (the act of speaking on television) has a direct transformative effect on the speaker. Third, both these effects are based in a power relationship, that is, they happen because of the significant power differential condensed in 'the authority who requires [the] confession'.

Who exactly is this 'authority' in the television talk show? It cannot be the talk-show host as such, she or he generally has celebrity status, but only rarely (Oprah Winfrey is the obvious exception) a broader cultural or personal authority. Nor can it be the studio audience, which is a general group, without any formal expertise. The 'authority' who requires the confession is rather the authority of television itself, as the assumed representative of the social centre and our access point to social reality. To recall the *Donnie* guest quoted by Priest (1996: 74): 'I felt like I had contributed something to society [by speaking on the show]'. Talk-show host and studio audience stand in for this assumed ritual authority.

This *representative* dimension of the disclosure space that talk shows provide can be traced in other comments by guests, and in a way that reflects the ritual status of their disclosures. Particularly interesting work has been done here on French talk and reality shows, first by Patrick Ehrenberg, and then in greater empirical depth by Dominique Mehl. Here is a woman speaking on television who had gone on the French programme *Bas Les Masques* (Beneath the Masks) to condemn her estranged mother:

I've broken a taboo, which is the taboo of silence. She's [the mother] not going to see it. She's strong. But so what? I've spoken. It's over.
(quoted in Mehl 1996: 38)

A few months later Mehl interviewed this same woman and she reflected on that moment of public disclosure:

I didn't think that I was acting in public. It was an announcement done for me. And that produced a liberating effect. When I saw the programme, I saw myself, me, adult, speaking calmly about mother. I wasn't a girl of three years any more.

(quoted in Mehl 1996: 38)

Note how the act of self-disclosure carried a meaning which was not articulated at the time by the performer: 'it was an announcement done for me'. This is the fundamental aspect of ritual (carrying meanings 'not entirely encoded by the performers') that Rappaport (1999: 24) identified. The effect, especially when confirmed by viewing from the outside (through the frame of the domestic viewer) is transformative, as Foucault insists the ritual of confession is: it produces intrinsic modifications in the person who articulates it' (1981a). They are *intrinsic* modifications, because they are based not on the exact details of what is said, but in the power relationship that is the context in which anything is sayable. Whether one speaks before God's representative (the priest) or science's representative (the doctor) or society's representative (television), it is one's belief in the power differential naturalised in the confession form that makes the act of confession possible.

Mehl takes the issue one stage further to an important, although speculative, conclusion: that mediated self-disclosures represent not so much the flouting of boundaries around private life through reckless self-disclosures, but a more subtle transformation: the regular embedding of mediated public performance into individual practices of self-definition. Hence, the (probably self-promoting) statement of the television producer quoted in part at the head of this chapter:

It's as if, in order to speak to those close to them, it's necessary [for them] to pass through TV. One could say that, in order that these people are reintroduced into the social circuit, they must pass through television ... which is their home [*qui est chez eux*].

(quoted in Mehl 1996: 57)

Mehl expresses the point even more boldly in the conclusion to her book:

The emergence of the intimate onto the public stage doesn't kill off the intimate but reformulates it and changes its boundaries. The mutual flow between exhibition and secrecy doesn't suppress the zones of shadow and silence; it re-models them ... intimacy can hardly make sense of itself without publicity ... 'Exteriority' is constitutive of interiority/intimacy [*'l'extimité' est constitutive de l'intimité*].

(Mehl 1996: 158, 163)

Whether or not you go this far, depends, in part, on whether you believe that these effects are universal, or limited to particular groups of people. Does the televised confession mean more to those for whom crossing the media/ordinary boundary is more significant? That requires further research, but what is clear is that this boundary's ritual status is intrinsic to the act of mediated self-disclosure.

Producing ritual

The performers are, of course, only one element in the social process of talk shows. There are also the producers. Both Gansson and Grindstaff have analysed the constraints on producing moments of self-disclosure, day in day out, to a regular schedule and a tight budget from unpredictable human 'raw material'. The arbitrariness and artificiality of much of the result is, they both acknowledge, inevitable to some degree (Gansson 1998: 15–17; Grindstaff 1997: 189; cf. Dovey 2000: 11). The producers must produce 'reality': live performance which (given the obvious constructedness of aspects of the performance setting) must not just be 'real', but 'really real'. The 'really real', as Gansson discusses, is the moment when something 'genuinely' uncontrolled happens in the highly controlled setting of the studio: for example, a fight (Gansson 1998: 91). Indeed the very purpose to which the talk shows' structure is directed is often to increase the likelihood of such *unconstructed* moments, what Grindstaff, borrowing from the parlance of pornographic production, calls the 'money shot': the 'moment of raw emotion' that 'proves' that the whole performance really is real (Grindstaff 1997: 168)?

It is the money shot, as something unplannable, that is the token of the 'reality' the talk shows claim to represent. Not all talk shows have a money shot as dramatic as *The Jerry Springer Show*, but they all focus on moments of confrontation. What form of 'reality' is favoured? Above all, the outbreak of extreme emotion, although it could, in theory, be other things (a sudden thought connection, a suddenly improvised joke). The automatic link between 'reality' and 'emotion' is clear from the talk of one producer quoted by Grindstaff, discussing a moment of extreme rage (a daughter flying at her hated mother) captured on television:

It was – this one scene is just like the best television moment you'll ever see. It was so powerful and real ... It was just a wild card because there was so much emotion there. It was a wild card and we got lucky.

(quoted in Grindstaff 1997: 183–4, original emphasis)

The same language of inflated emotion is reproduced in routine directions to guests and audience also. Emotion, it is implied, is important and it has a representative power:

Don't hold back on those emotions because this is your big chance to show millions of people you really care about this issue. If you're going to laugh, laugh big.

(advice to guest, quoted in Grindstaff 1997: 180–1)

Remember you represent all those viewers out there who can't ask questions for themselves. You represent America.

(instructions to audience, quoted in Grindstaff 1997: 180–1)

Note here how the ritual nature of the studio situation as a representative space is portrayed as something that is the responsibility of the audience to sustain; what is more, it is associated automatically with heightened displays of emotion.

Here the myth of the mediated centre has turned into stage directions, whose 'naturalness' is deceptive, as are all ritual instructions. Inside the space where that myth is reproduced (the studio), the distinction between 'real' and 'constructed' is inevitably blurred. Every act there is both constructed (from the perspective of everyday action) and real in its ritual intent: in the precisely calibrated acts of talk-show performance we have a contemporary form of 'ritual mastery' (Bourdieu), the attuned acts of the ritualised body. An unknown factor here, however, is the degree to which performers' internalisation of these directions makes their emotion false: are talk shows evidence of the spread of the simulations Mestrovic calls 'postemotions' (1997)? But it remains unclear how we could tell a real emotion from a 'postemotion', so the point is, as yet, unanswerable.

The basis of the talk-show ritual, however, remains an *assumption* that such sites of self-disclosure carry a representative significance. This (not some looser, more comforting notion of community) is the 'consensus' such shows reinforce, and they do so whether or not we see the shows' emotional displays as 'real' or simulated. Thus Gansson's interviewees at various points use the metaphor of 'out' or 'out there' (1998: 74, 79, 104), a banal but hardly trivial expression of the representative public status of what is performed within the talk show 'frame'. Without some degree of 'trust' (here in the media's representative status), no exposure of self-identity can take place (Giddens 1991: 41). The representative and expressive aspects of ritual are both important, and in no way undermine the show's ritual status; on the contrary, they go together. Ritualisation requires, first, a sense that a wider consensus is engaged about transcendent forces (in this case, the imaginary transcendence of 'society', reinforced by that other comforting transcendental reference point, 'human nature'), and second, an allowance for individual acts of appropriation (Bell 1997: 169, 220). Ritual forms are reproduced precisely through the frames within which extreme individual expression makes sense, at least to the performers.

MONITORING SELF-DISCLOSURE

In the case of talk-show disclosures, there are at least three, and possibly four, quite distinct processes superimposed upon one another:

- 1 the individual acts of self-disclosure or performance;
- 2 the process of production that contains them (I have concentrated on these first two themes);
- 3 the process of watching the programme (which I have not analysed because (cf. Chapter 2) it is not a media ritual in itself).

A fourth level comes when we analyse the broader phenomenon of the talk show and the other reality television forms that crowd our broadcast schedules. If, as we argued in Chapter 6, 'reality TV' shows, taken as a genre, are a process of socialised surveillance, what should we conclude about the talk show and other mediated forms of self-disclosure? In spite of the difference in ritualised formality between the talk show's emotional studio audience and the 'reality TV' series shot on location, there are important similarities. Both sub-genres show us that surveillance is the price of entering the most widely available spaces of self-disclosure: as Handelman puts it, 'the spectacle becomes the representation of social order under surveillance' (1998: xxxix). There is no systematic information gathering and retrieval (we assume!) behind the talk show, but we have here nonetheless the raw material from which the stereotypical categories of a broader *surveillance culture* might be forged. The price of appearing on television to speak in your own name is to be categorised in terms over which you have very limited control, categories (for example, the misfit, the eccentric, the waster) that are entangled with the more general categories of media rituals ('ordinary person' versus 'media person').

While this basic point affects everyone, different groups of people have different spaces of self-disclosure available to them, depending on their cultural and symbolic capital, and those spaces come with different constraints. The written autobiography (a form available to very few) allows very different strategies of self-monitoring and defensive adjustment from appearing on a prime-time television show, edited usually to foreground those moments when you have lost your self-control; moreover the opportunities for reflexive self-adjustment in, for example, *The Jerry Springer Show*, are very different from that in the celebrity chat show.

Worse, appearing on television or other central media exposes you to monitoring far beyond the original act of disclosure. The press, in particular, tend to monitor quite closely 'ordinary people' as they pass backwards and forwards across the media/ordinary boundary; not surprisingly, because it is the boundary on which the media's own authority, in part, depends. Here is an example from the UK tabloid *The Sun*

concerning one of the contestants of the second UK series of *Big Brother* (just one of the overlaps between reality TV and talk shows as zones of self-disclosure). This story appeared a few weeks after the television series had finished. Under the front page headline 'PAUL AND HELEN BONK', *The Sun* wrote that:

Big Brother star Paul has revealed last night he HAS bedded blonde housemate Helen ... Paul Clarke, 25, revealed intimate details of his relationship with Helen Adams, 23, to 400 revellers at a nightclub ... Paul's boasts came just THREE DAYS after he vowed never to divulge details of his sex life with Welsh hair-dresser Helen ...

(*The Sun*, 25 August 2001: 1, 7)

On the face of it, why should a newspaper highlight the duplicity of one of its potential informants? Doesn't this in the long run serve to undermine similar revelations in its own pages? But there is no paradox from a ritual perspective. Tracking people's uncertain dealings with a ritual boundary only reinforces the wider significance of that boundary. There is a similar boundary play in talk shows themselves, which now may place concealed cameras in 'off-stage' areas, so that the performers can be tracked as they negotiate their entries, exits, and re-entries into and from the official television arena.

Talk shows, of course, represent just one part of the wider field of mediated self-disclosure. Sometimes non-media people use the broader ritual space of television to frame new forms of action. We discussed in Chapter 6 the *Video Diary* as one version of this. An example in which media institutions had no hand, it would seem, is the distressing case of a British woman who had been stalked by a man for many months, and in despair decided to confront him face-to-face on television (*The Guardian* (G2 section), 19 July 2001: 8–9). This might seem like a simple attempt to generate legal evidence, but it was not, since the stalker was *already* the subject of a court order, which he had broken; in any case, the filming of the meeting was prearranged and, it seems, consented to by both parties. The meeting was distressing for the woman concerned, but the piece that told the victim's story in the *Guardian* ended with a defiant statement: 'I'm not a victim, I like to think of myself as a survivor.' What is intriguing about this case is the woman's idea that a *television* camera would make a positive difference to her situation. Why? If it was that cameras were thought essential as security, why not have police filming? Why perform this meeting in public in any case? Was the act of doing so intended as a way of confirming the reality of the meeting? We see here, if only in fragmentary form, how the assumed 'representative' nature of mediated situations can shape individual actions, and well outside the standard television genres. As argued throughout the book, the ritual space of the media extends much further than the actions we might formally call 'media rituals'.

SELF-DISCLOSURE ON THE INTERNET

I want finally to examine how the Internet offers new directions, as well as complexities, for the ritual analysis of mediated self-disclosure.

It has been clear for a long time that the Web offers unprecedented opportunities for self-disclosure (or at least *apparent* self-disclosure), from the early literature on MUDs (Multi-User Domains) and bulletin boards (Turkle 1996), to the more recent work on personal Websites (Chandler 1997; Chandler and Roberts-Young 1998), to the new and little studied phenomenon of Webcam sites and Web diaries.⁸ I want to explore how far the notion of ritual boundary can help us understand what is at stake for those who make these forms of self-disclosure. First, however, let me make some more general points.

Some forms of Web-based self-disclosure (Webcams) involve a significant degree of skill and resources, and those without them need to make compromises. They may place their site in a general 'umbrella' site for Webcam sites (such as <http://www.camcentral.com> and <http://webcamworld.com>) along with hundreds of other Webcam sites. Some Webcam-site authors use the standard site format which the organisers supply, although most people try within that framework to develop their own more personalised material. A second restriction, which may or may not be significant for particular individuals, is that your site is likely to be presented by the general Website organisers alongside pornographic material, simply because this is one of the most obvious ways in which the organisers of general Webcam sites can make money. My point is not specifically an ethical one, but more about the risk of miscategorisation which any individual site producer has to negotiate in order to get seen. Webcam site producers have only limited control over the interpretative context in which people will encounter their site.

The second general point is that, to a greater degree than on television, it is often difficult to decide whether or not there is a ritual dimension to Internet acts of self-disclosure. Some language used by site authors suggests that a personal Website, diary, or 'Cam' is an act of disclosure 'to the world' (conceiving the Web in effect as a stretched-out version of the media's mythical centre). Other language describes the act of self-disclosure quite differently, as a semi-private act of information circulation directed at existing friends and family, or, at most, at new friends recently encountered through the Web. The Internet as a 'many-to-many medium' is always potentially ambiguous as to whether you are communicating with 'the world' or some private zone, or something in between, which makes the ritual dimension of self-disclosure on the Internet equally uncertain. Closer analysis is needed of particular cases.

Miller and Slater (2000: 16) have noted the ambiguity between the many personal Internets (involved in individual uses) and 'the Internet', the unified, naturalised,

space of social coordination which much Internet discourse constructs. It is the latter that is more likely to generate ritual forms, although it will be some time, I suspect, before these forms become stable. Performance, including identity performance, is ambiguous on the Internet (Lundlof and Sharzer 1998: 178), but in any case the idea of Internet ritual is particularly difficult, if one follows Bourdieu in emphasising the importance of the ritual body. As Lundlof and Sharzer put it (1998: 173): 'in virtual space, most behavior is inscribed as visible discourse only'. A shift may occur when a larger proportion of transmitted material is non-text, for example live audio and video streaming. For now, however, uncertainty about the long-term ritual significance of the Internet is unavoidable.

To illustrate the ambiguity, take on the one hand this promotional description of the pleasures of the 'weblog' or 'blogging': writing a personal diary or story for your Website (once again there are general sites, which collect together these diaries for a price). One such diary, Mike Anderiesz writes, hints:

at a time when ordinary people will have the means to command mainstream media attention directly from their keyboards. Whether new writers, artists, and celebrities will be discovered this way remains to be seen, but a bright agent could do worse than checking out the following top five blogs ...
(*The Guardian* (Online section), 23 August 2001: 4)

Here the public status of 'blogging' sites is emphasised, but the crucial question is begged: how can you secure public attention for one among millions of personal sites? Already, it is worth noting, there are forms of 'celebrification' in this area, for example the 'Bloggies' awards for the best piece of writing (<http://www.bloggies.com>).⁹

On the other hand, in their study of personal Webpages, Chandler and Roberts-Young discovered some striking cases where the Webpage author conceived of the site as private:

The main reason for my secrecy [about my site] was that people who are not familiar with the internet do not understand why my homepage is up, they do not know about it, and to me it would be quite embarrassing for people in school to read the pages and ins and outs of my life! ... I tend to see the internet as something that people only understand if they actually use it, and personal homepages like mine may seem strange to them, you know, why would I put a page up on the Internet about my life? — *they don't realise who it is for*.
(quoted in Chandler and Roberts-Young 1998: 12, my emphasis)

This last example is in fact at odds with Chandler's supposition in an earlier article that Webpages are a form of 'asynchronous mass communication' (Chandler 1997:

2, 3). Given the enormous difficulty, even if you wanted to, of getting your personal homepage noticeable by a general browser, there is little scope as yet for 'asynchronous mass communication', except perhaps through commercially managed umbrella sites which collect together large numbers of private sites in a generic package, in which case, how 'personal' would your message ever be? There is therefore a real ambiguity about the personal/public nature of the World Wide Web as a site for self-disclosure and its relation, therefore, with the ritual space of the media, as it existed before the Web. This, arguably, is as it should be, given that the Internet is not one single thing or space, but 'numerous new technologies used by diverse people, in diverse real-world locations' (Miller and Slater 2000: 1).

Less ambiguous, however, is some of the rhetoric surrounding the Web and its possibilities for self-disclosure. We have already seen one optimistic writer discussing the democratic potential of 'blogging'. Take this advertisement for the new Panasonic e.Cam displayed on the London Underground¹⁰ where the association, already noted in the television talk show, between the 'reality' of self-disclosure and emotional display is unambiguous:

*Months to get to know her
Weeks to fall in love
Seconds to show the world
Showing your feelings is easy with an e.Cam.*

On the face of it, the individual Webcam site could start a wider denaturalisation of the myth of the mediated centre: we would begin at last to realise Mark Poster's description of a 'second media age' in which "'reality" becomes multiple' (Poster 1995: 85). But this is to draw on another deep, if recent, myth of the Internet's prophets, most notably Nicholas Negroponte's slogan 'prime time becomes my time'. Such visions, as I argue in the next chapter, are certainly *not* to be derided. But, as we saw in Chapter 6, even the concept of 'interactivity' on which they depend has begun to be appropriated to support the media's traditional claims to represent a centralised social reality (as in *Big Brother*).

In any case, and against the trend of this speculation, some personal Websites list basic personal information about their author's likes and dislikes, but only as the *form* for pursuing a very different purpose. One female Webcam site-author, whom I interviewed via email as part of ongoing research on Webcam sites, put it this way:

I simply set it up to offer something different on my personal home page ... There are millions of personal home pages [without Webcams], it's hard to get yours seen ... My website isn't aimed at anyone in particular. Due to my interest in the computer industry and the Internet, then it is expected that you have a home

page and an email address. My site simply helps me do that! ... I don't really know what impression I want to give people. *I'm not making the pages for them, they're for me* ... I don't cover anything personal on my website ... and I don't feed people my address/contact details etc. Obviously as I don't want people turning up on my doorstep!

(email interview, 7 January 2002, my emphasis)

We have here perhaps the 'degree zero' of media ritualisation. The author denies that there is a personal message communicated by her site, except enough conventional personal content to enable her to pass on a public message about her Web skills. Even this limited personal presence on the World Wide Web is hedged around with defences: not only the exclusion of details which would expose the author to unwanted 'pilgrimages', but, as the author explained, a front page to the site covered with links to pornographic sites. When I asked why, the reason given was purely defensive:

If I don't have those links, I tend to get a lot of emails asking why I don't get naked on my cam. So I simply link to these sites to help get rid of the people that are simply looking for porn, and not a webcam.

(email interview, 7 January 2002)

It is clear, at least, that, if a 'democratic' space of self-disclosure opens up on the World Wide Web, it will have to work *against* many other powerful forces: the sheer difficulty of obtaining more than random exposure for one's site in a universe of millions of sites,¹¹ the costs of maintaining individually distinctive sites (especially if production standards go on being raised by those with access to the more expensive skills and equipment), and the difficulties of staking out in an already heavily commercialised cyberspace somewhere where private individuals can give an account of themselves without constantly being mistaken for pornography or other for-profit sites.

The long-term impacts of such developments are uncertain. We may be at the start of a gradual transformation and de-legitimation of the media's ritual categories – including the dismantling of the category of the 'ordinary person' – or we may be at the start of a period where those ritual categories simply operate under heavier disguise. It would be foolish to predict which is more likely.

CONCLUSION

The tentativeness of these last comments is justified by a wider uncertainty which this book can hardly hope to change. This is the uncertainty about how the relationship between media and ritual will develop in the Internet era: towards the gradual

dispersal of the media's ritual space in the vast, fractal space of the Web, or towards the further intensification of that ritual space's coordinating power, at least in the Web's central zones (the zones which the typical user will come to know)?

In the course of this chapter, I have discussed how different people may be positioned differently by media rituals that, as *rituals*, must draw on boundaries and categories with a general social reference. But I have said little about the ways in which different sites of self-disclosure seem appropriate and representative to different performers. For many viewers, *The Jerry Springer Show* is simply not a space where they could imagine disclosing aspects of their private life. Does this suggest that the apparent unity of the media's ritual space, even without considering the Internet, is fracturing into 'public spherules' (Gitlin 1998) in ways that would undermine, once and for all, a Durkheimian view of the media's integrative social 'function'? This fracturing of the television audience into sub-communities of taste is of course a much wider phenomenon than the talk show. It is especially paradoxical on talk shows, because a sense of a 'representative' space is built into the form. Given, however, that the notion of the media's social function implied here is always only a construction, there is no reason why this construction cannot be played out in different (but parallel) forms, and as such engaged with by groups occupying a range of positions in social space.

Having raised, however, the question of the potential fracturing of the myth of the mediated centre, the issue arises: can we think beyond that myth, and beyond media rituals, at least in their current form? I want in the concluding chapter to explore how we might open up new ways of imagining the future of media rituals; imagining, against the grain, a new way of orienting ourselves, as private individuals and as citizens, to the ritual authority of the media, in whatever form it survives.