

FALL TV PREVIEW: WHY OUR CRITICS LOVE ROSIE, CONAN, MTV'S *FANatic*, AND RON INSANA

BRILL'S

CONTENT

THE INDEPENDENT OF THE INFORMATION AGE

**WHAT
BOB WOODWARD
WON'T TELL US**

**WE PUT *CONSUMER
REPORTS* THROUGH
OUR TEST LAB**

**INSIDE THE
AUSTIN POWERS
SPIN MACHINE**

**FROM IMUS TO THE
TABS TO THE *TIMES*:
The 10 NY media
heavies Hillary will
have to overcome**

**PAYING JOCKS
TO COMMENT**

SCREAM TV

**How Chris
Matthews built
a career on it**

• Jack Germond
on why he quit it

• Deborah Tannen
on what's wrong
with it

**RATING THE DIGITAL
TV PLAYBACK TOYS**

**ONE PAPER'S
QUESTIONABLE
PULITZER**

SEPTEMBER 1999

\$3.95US \$5.95CAN



Hardball's
Chris Matthews

BRILL'S CONTENT™

THE INDEPENDENT VOICE OF THE INFORMATION AGE

SEPTEMBER 1999 • VOLUME TWO • NUMBER SEVEN

FEATURES

78 SCREAM TV Chris Matthews Won't Shut Up

BY GAY JERVEY

The TV talking head with passionate, nonstop opinions often doesn't even pause for guests to answer his shouted questions. But that on-air bluster conceals the *Hardball* host's considerable intellect.

84 Jack W. Germond reveals why he finally said bye-bye to *The McLaughlin Group*.

88 *The Argument Culture* author Deborah Tannen explains how scream TV values argument over honest debate.



78

Hardball's Chris Matthews schmoozes with presidential hopeful Dan Quayle (and Quayle's daughter) shortly before the pair spar for the cameras.



66

All things Austin: More was spent to promote the summer hit than to produce it, but that's now movie business as usual.

66 Welcome To My Hype-Industrial Complex, Baby!

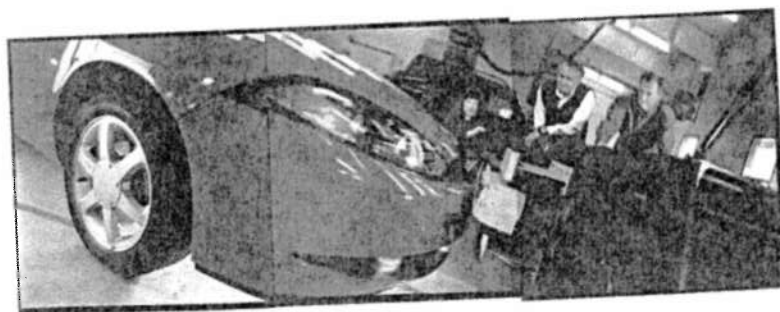
BY MICHAEL COLTON

All the cunning of Dr. Evil can't touch the well-orchestrated assault waged by marketers, merchandisers, and a movie studio to sell us all things *Austin Powers*.

70 Testing Consumer Reports

BY JENNIFER GREENSTEIN

We test the august *Consumer Reports* for fairness and bias. The results are in: *Caveat emptor*.

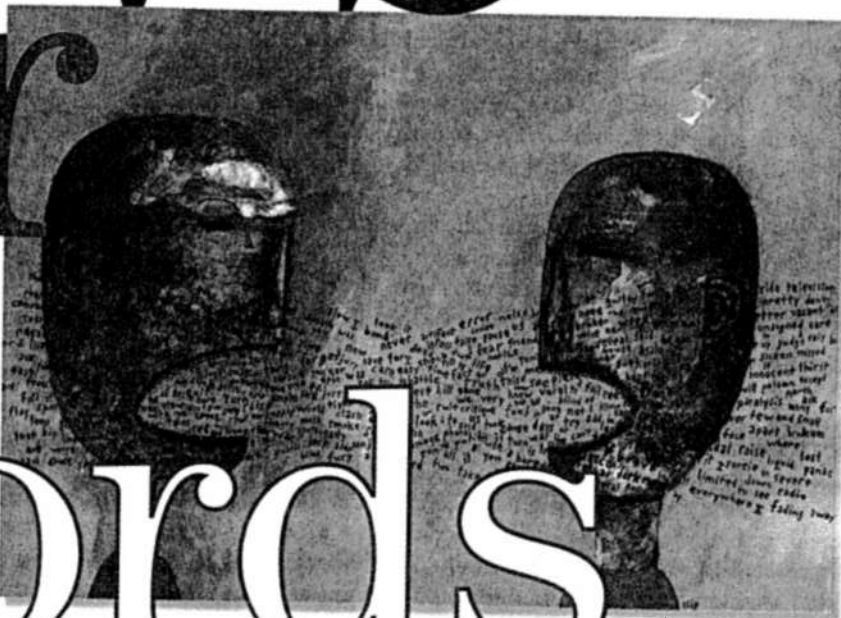


70 *Consumer Reports is famed for its thoroughness and freedom from bias. But sometimes it falls short.*

ON OUR COVER:

Chris Matthews sculpture by Robert Grossman; sculpture photo by Matthew Klein

TV's War Of Words



Scream TV reduces all discussions to oversimplified, black-and-white arguments between two polarized sides. Subtlety and nuance are scorned, because the goal isn't to understand an issue, but to win. It's yet another symptom of the Argument Culture. by Deborah Tannen

WHEN MY BOOK *THE ARGUMENT CULTURE* WAS PUBLISHED last year, I appeared on *Charles Grodin*. Returning home after the show, I found a message on my answering machine. "I tuned in at the time you told me," a friend's voice said, "but there were two men shouting over each other, and it set my teeth on edge. I switched it off."

I laughed at the irony. In introducing me, Grodin confessed that he had at times been guilty of the kind of interview I wrote about. He had an illustration for the viewers to see: himself and then-Senator Alan Simpson shouting at each other. This is what drove my friend from her screen—proving a point I made in the book and on the show.

Why are more news and public-affairs shows turning into shouting matches between left and right, liberal and conservative, Democrat and Republican? For one thing, with round-the-clock news, the airwaves have to be filled, and these shows are easy and economical to assemble: Find a conservative and a liberal and you've got your show. Also, with the advent of

cable has come increased competition, so producers need to make shows entertaining. But where do they get the idea that watching fights is fun? The answer is the argument culture.

The argument culture (as I explain in my book) is a pervasive war-like atmosphere that makes us approach public dialogue, and just about anything else we need to accomplish, as if it were a fight. It rests on the assumption that opposition is the best way to get anything done: The best way to discuss an idea is to set up a debate; the best way to settle a dispute is litigation that pits one party against the other; the best way to begin an essay is to attack someone; the best way to show you're really thinking is to criticize; and—as we see in the scream TV shows—the best way to cover news is to find spokespeople who express the most extreme views and present them as "both sides." Conflict and opposition are as necessary as cooperation and agreement, but the scale is off balance, with conflict and opposition overweighted.

By turning everything into a left-right fight, the argument

culture gives us trumped-up, showcase "debates" between two oversimplified sides, leaving no room for the real arguments. What's wrong with lively debate? Nothing, when *debate* is a synonym for open discussion. But in most televised debates, the goal is not to understand but to win. You can't explore nuances or complexities; that would weaken your position. And few issues fall neatly into just two sides. Most are a crystal of many sides—and some have just one. Perhaps most destructive, if the goal is a lively fight, the most polarized views are best, so the extremes get the most airtime and are allowed to define the issues. Viewers conclude that if the two sides are so far apart, the problem can't be solved, so why try?

If everything has to be squeezed into the procrustean bed of left and right, moderate views are drowned out. *Boston Globe* columnist Ellen Goodman (perceived as "the left") notes that if she's invited to appear on a show that she'd just as soon not do, all she needs to say is, "I can see both sides; it's complicated." Ann Coulter (a commentator on "the right") also finds that when she takes a position that doesn't fit producers' ideas of conservative, they don't want her.

The time crunch is a major factor in scream TV. A half-hour show (only 22 minutes of programming), is broken into three or four segments, each treating a different issue in progressively shorter chunks of time that are shared among four, five, even six, commentators. As if even these short segments aren't fast enough, each show presents instant pronouncements, such as *McLaughlin's* end-of-show round-the-table predictions, the mid-show highlights on *Hardball With Chris Matthews*, or *The Capital Gang's* viewer-submitted "Outrage of the Week." (It's telling that it's the *outrage* of the week: in this format, *provocative* typically means "provoking to anger.")

The battle imagery starts with the names: *Crossfire* (hinting war), *Hardball* (hinting super-competitive sports), *The Capital Gang* (a whiff of brash street fighters). The very structure of these shows is based on underlying metaphors of war and sports: Two sides duke it out; one wins, the other loses. But it's all a game: See the warring parties jocularly sparring at the end of the show, as the camera pulls away? Those who take part in these pseudo-debates know that there is a display aspect to it.

The shout-down shows distort public discussion of vital issues. Their pacing corrupts the information viewers get. Eleanor Clift (as I quoted her in *The Argument Culture*) explains, "The nature of these shows is you're forced to speak more provocatively to make a point in the short time you have before you get interrupted. People know there's an entertainment factor, but the danger is, it turns us all into stereotypes, because you don't have time to express the ifs, ands, or buts."

When I talk about the argument culture, I am often asked about Jerry Springer. Springer's show is also scream TV. Phil Donahue, who pioneered the format, used it to convey information provided by experts—with the audience interaction added. Oprah Winfrey saw the potential of the format to create a sense of connection among her guests, the studio audience, viewers, and herself by focusing less on the expert guests and more on the average people who come on to talk about their lives. Springer dispenses with experts entirely and

exploits only one kind of drama: getting average people to come on his show to fight. But I worry less about Springer because no one is watching his show to form opinions about current events, as they are with news and information shows.

The argument culture also encompasses an ethic of aggression—praising those in power would be boring, rolling over. Those who take positions against the president, for example, don't just criticize—they sneer, ridicule, and heap scorn. By setting that tone, scream TV encourages viewers to approach others in an adversarial spirit, creating an atmosphere of animosity that spreads like a fever. As the Egyptian author Leila Ahmed wrote, describing the effect of the terms and tone in which Gamal Abdel Nasser habitually denounced his enemies, "once you make hatred and derision...normal and acceptable in one area, they become generalized to everything else."

But audiences love it, defenders of the genre say. Ratings, they claim, are the pudding-proof. But do the ratings really support this view? According to Nielsen, for June 1999 the percentage of households with TVs that tuned in to *Crossfire* and *Hardball* was 0.3 percent—a projected 305,000 households for *Crossfire* and 251,000 for *Hardball*. *The Capital Gang* (which airs on weekends) did similarly at 0.3 percent, with 347,000 viewers; *Equal Time* (also a daily show) did even worse, with 0.1 percent or 129,000 viewers.

Larry King Live is also a talking-heads cable show that airs weeknights, but one that gives viewers an extended conversation with one guest at a time. Though King is often ridiculed by his peers for asking only "softball" questions of his guests, far more viewers prefer his approach, giving him, according to Nielsen, 0.5 percent (or 538,000) of households. That's far larger than the audience of *Crossfire* and *Hardball*.

What do audiences like about these shows? Part of their appeal, I think, lies in their hosts. John McLaughlin's booming voice sounds like an old newsreel voice-over. Introducing a topic, he uses strategic pauses and sudden loudness to add drama: "The AMA," he tells viewers, "has voted to allow doctors [pause] TO UNIONIZE!!" American bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade "was...CRIMINAL NEGLIGENCE!!" (though he adds, *sotto voce*, "many believe"). McLaughlin's manner comes across as good-natured bluster.

Chris Matthews of *Hardball* does not shout or pronounce in dramatic highs and lows, stops and starts. He charms with his blond, boyish good looks and ready smile. The drama comes from the fast pace at which the words roll off his tongue, like a sportscaster rushing to keep up with the plays—in keeping with the metaphor of the show's name and his nightly call to arms: "Let's play hardball." [For more on Matthews, see "Chris Matthews Won't Shut Up," page 78.]

Why has talk on radio and TV become more a matter of *having* arguments than of *making* arguments? As I explain in *The Argument Culture*, part of the cause is the medium itself. Television (like radio) returns, in some ways, to the past. It was the advent of print that made Western society less disputatious, according to cultural linguist Walter Ong: In the absence of audiences before which to stage debates, attention gradually focused on the internal argumentation of published tracts rather than debaters' performance. The rise of contentiousness today is fueled in part by the return of oral argument on TV and radio, where once again the ability to dispute publicly is valued—and judged—as a performance.

Deborah Tannen is professor of linguistics at Georgetown University. Her books include *You Just Don't Understand*, *Talking from 9 to 5*, and *The Argument Culture*.