

CONTINUED...

Television

continued from page 1

viewees' comments with cheers and cat-calls, not unlike a football game.

For instance, in the boyfriend-dumping installment of "Ricki Lake," a young woman announced the news to her boyfriend on the air.

"A lot of people would say you're pretty heartless to do this to him on national TV. Why didn't you break it to him at home?" Lake, seemingly perplexed, lectured to the woman.

On the other hand, "heartless" is a term that many would say best describes the people responsible for these talk shows. Indeed, debate about the morality of these programs, commonly referred to as "tabloid TV" or "trash TV," can be as heated as the conflict that Maury, Montel and Sally Jessy thrive upon.

"They teach about things that mean nothing. There's no morals, no values," asserted Michelle Levey, youth minister in the Catholic Community of Mt. Morris and Nunda.

"The one thing that seems to be missing is commitment," noted Karen Rinefierd, diocesan coordinator of Young Adult, Adult and Family Faith Formation.

"There's not much talk about that," Rinefierd continued. "It's 'do what feels right for now, and if it doesn't work out, then blow it off and start again.'"

Yet tabloid TV is also a wildly popular phenomenon of the 1990s, particularly among young adult women. And, because some of these programs air in the late afternoon, they're also accessible to school-age children.

Dr. Jim Seward, communications/journalism department chairperson at St. John Fisher College, wonders if today's youths will grow up believing family dysfunction is the norm.

"My concern is that you see this every single day, and you begin to believe this is reality," Seward remarked.

"The problem is that you see so many dysfunctional families, and I don't know if the audience sees that they're dysfunctional," he added.

Seward pointed out that the racy topics featured usually involve an extremely small portion of the population. Yet with the saturation of these shows, he said, "you distort the perception of the percentage."

Prime-time comedies, although seen less frequently (30-minute weekly segments for most, compared to one-hour daily talk shows Monday through Friday), also hold the power to influence public perception. In addition, "Seinfeld" and "Home Improvement," two highly rated sitcoms, are already in syndication.

Comedies command the largest audiences per episode of any television format, according to a recent Nielsen rat-

ings poll. "Friends" and "Seinfeld" were the country's first- and second-rated prime-time shows for the week of Jan. 15-21, with respective Nielsen point totals of 20.8 and 20.1. (A single rating point represents 959,000 households.)

On the other hand, "Oprah Winfrey" commanded a much lower average rating of 7.8 over 10 weeks from September to November, and "Ricki Lake" and Jenny Jones" each stood at 4.7.

"Friends" and "Seinfeld" thrive off ensemble casts featuring single adults, as does "Frasier" (No. 10). And, indeed, some episodes' fictional plots rival those of their tabloid TV counterparts. A "Friends" episode last month featured the "marriage" of a lesbian couple, one of whom has a baby by her ex-husband — who gives her away during the ceremony. In addition, a famous episode of "Seinfeld" focused on adult masturbation.

Marriage and family do make their presence felt in top-10 shows such as "Mad About You" (No. 4), in which the central characters are married and have discussed starting a family; and "Home Improvement" (No. 6), featuring a married couple with three boys.

Yet those shows aren't quite enough for Barbara Carroll, diocesan coordinator of sacramental catechesis. She said the overall message of 1990s television "can't help but have an impact" on the way marriage is viewed by the masses.

Although Carroll can't gauge the precise level of that impact, she feels that media aren't helping to reverse the ever-increasing divorce rate among Americans — Catholics included.

"We (as Catholics) hold that marriage is forever, and we have never wavered from that. So what is it that helps people to think on an everyday level that it's OK to end it?" Carroll wondered. "There has to be something in society, or on TV, that says it's OK."

While "Friends" and "Seinfeld" play down marriage and family, Rinefierd pointed out that 1950s situation comedies depicting happy families with minimal conflict — such as "Leave It to Beaver" and "Father Knows Best" — fare no better at reflecting the norm.

"In general, I don't think media has ever portrayed married life realistically," Rinefierd commented. "The media's job is to entertain or titillate — or, in the 1950s or 1960s, to portray the ideal."

The mixed message of "Leave It to Beaver," Rinefierd explained, is that couples "think marriage is supposed to be like the Cleavers', and then they find it isn't. Then it gives them the idea that theirs isn't the right marriage. But any relationship takes major work for it to be enduring and life-giving."

However, in regard to "Leave It to Beaver," Seward pointed out, "If you're

looking for unreality, I'd rather see that unreality."

At its best, television should offer realistic portrayals — both positive and negative — of marriage and family life, Carroll said.

"Somehow, we have to get to the middle ground," she commented.

But would viewers embrace this kind of programming?

"You have to have enough in the plot so people can identify with it. But it also has to be different enough, or have variations, to make it entertaining. People don't want to watch their own lives," stated Bill McCarthy, a professor and communications specialist at Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C.

Carroll isn't entirely sold on that viewpoint, asking, "Is it what people want, or is it what the system gives us?"

Last year, Oprah Winfrey addressed the issue by toning down the sensational slant of her show to create a more wholesome approach — such as the couple married 60 years. According to the Dec. 11, 1995, issue of *Broadcasting and Cable* magazine, Winfrey's show had dropped 9 percent in the Nielsen ratings over one year, beginning in the fall of 1994. However, Winfrey still held a 66 percent viewership lead over her nearest competitors, Jenny Jones and Ricki Lake.

The article also stated that daytime talk shows currently in development are being pitched as "fresher and friendlier."

These factors indicate that the tabloid aspect of talk TV may be reaching its peak, yet in no way will these programs be departing any time soon. And, as the menu of shows available via cable and satellite continues to swell, media literacy is taking on increased priority for diocesan officials.

"You have to be able to discern, and know what are the proper values," Carroll commented.

Mary Ellen FitzGibbons, diocesan audiovisual resource librarian, suggested that parents watch as much television as possible with their children so that a child's value system is not based predominately on TV viewing.

Youth minister Levey agreed, saying that otherwise a child won't know "the difference between falsehood and truth."

"Media is a part of our lives, and that's not going to go away. And we need to be educated about it," FitzGibbons said.

Rinefierd shares this realistic perspective. Yet she also remains optimistic that human beings' desire for lifelong relationships will endure, regardless of what TV is telling us.

"Across the board, any time people are asked what they want, they want another person to care for and be cared for by," Rinefierd said. "I think that idea is pretty well in place and will remain."

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