THE INTIMACY OF THE INTERVIEW CHAT SHOW
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Since its inception, chat shows, talk shows and variety shows have been a staple of what Frances Bonner calls ‘ordinary television’. They fill the gaps left over by drama and news events, they take up space during the day or later at night, they offer a sense of familiarity and regularity that audiences can dip in and out of, or else watch in a habituated state of distraction. One particular type of the genre focuses on interviews or discussions with celebrities, stars and other prominent people. Intimacy of this kind works best later at night, and in the interview form, the chat show presents the regular possibility of slipping behind the façade of the star profile, finding moments of that highly prized and elusive privacy that stars guard like a treasure. The best of these programmes capture a glimpse beneath the surface, a fragment of the private lives of the famous.

After a long and often lacklustre history of the genre, the intimacy and entertainment of the interview or ‘chat’ with celebrities has again become a hotly contested and highly rating format for Australian television. Competitiveness has spawned a host of new ideas. Shows like Rove Live, The Panel, Micallef Tonight and Enough Rope With Andrew Denton, each revolve in very different ways around the interview. However, as some of these shows are beginning to demonstrate, it may not only be the star status of the guests that attracts audiences. Equally important is the way in which the distinction between celebrity and privacy is traversed.

The attraction of any elicited moments of intimacy is obvious. When the boundaries between private and public are so strongly drawn (and often fiercely defended), the rewards of revealing moments of intimacy for audiences are great. When an interview programme is capable of moving beyond the surface, behind the banal promotion or light entertainment of the celebrity industry into the domain of the private life of public personalities, something interesting is at hand. The ABC’s Enough Rope With Andrew Denton has caught the attention not only of television analysts and critics, but
also of the general public who crave this kind of intimacy with the stars.

Andrew Denton has a growing reputation for being able to get beneath the surface, to achieve the kind of intimacy that many interviewers only dream of. He often, but not always, provides insight into the lives of the extraordinary members of our society. The programme is much like the BBC's *Parkinson* in this sense, but it has attempted a key shift that has often failed on Australian television—getting the audience involved. Denton includes in his interview line-up guests who can be distinguished by everyday attributes such as their work profession—cleaners, teachers and psychiatrists, for example. He also makes regular forays into the normally subdued and shy Australian audience to prize out the extraordinary. Although this act of turning the camera back upon its audience is one of television's original and often unsung roles, the interview chat show achieves something when it can let us see the extraordinary possibilities of our own kind along side the ordinariness of our society's celebrities and stars. In toying with this distinction, Denton's interview show will continue to offer cultural insight as well as moments of intimacy with the stars.

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Endnotes
