

FAMILY IS AN “F” WORD TOO:
COMPARING FAMILY VALUES IN PRESS COVERAGE OF *THE OSBOURNES*
AND *AN AMERICAN FAMILY*

by

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(Under the Direction of Carolina Acosta-Alzuru)

ABSTRACT

Drawing upon the myths of family and the American Dream, this thesis examines how press coverage of two reality television shows, *The Osbournes* and *An American Family*, perpetuate the myth of the nuclear family. Articles from *The New York Times*, *Time*, *Newsweek* and *TV Guide* were analyzed.

INDEX WORDS: Reality television, The Osbournes, An American Family,
Press coverage, Family values, Mythology, Textual analysis

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this to the people who taught me *my* family values: my parents, Joseph and Carol Muse, and my grandparents, Edward and Louise Alexander. I know Mom, Dad, Nan and Pa find it humorous that my pursuit of the American Dream involves exposing it for the myth it really is.

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appearing on the series. Just because one is not on television doesn't mean one isn't part of the brood.

Bill, Pat, Kevin, Grant, Delilah, Michele and the late Lance Loud should also be acknowledged for being pioneers in the reality television genre. I bet they didn't think these "home movies" would cause such a media sensation that would be dissected 30 years later.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Because Ozzy, Sharon, Jack and Kelly have given us the only reality-TV program that smacks of actual reality, not of the narcissistic posturings of show-business aspirants preening through some network-contrived elimination contest. Because not even the most acute case of overexposure since Regis's monochromed "Is that your final answer?" heyday can take away from the found-object comedic brilliance of *The Osbournes*, now in its second season on MTV. Because paterfamilias Ozzy, despite being a serious drug casualty who carries himself, as one British magazine put it, "like a full-napped toddler," is a touchingly decent man. Because Sharon, currently telling cancer to *fack awf*, is a pistol, the show's true star. Because Jack and Kelly, chunky and profane, are the most representative American teens on television—despite having vast wealth and English accents. Because "Sharunnnnn!" has now taken its place in the American lexicon alongside "Stella!," "Wilma!," and "To the moon, Alice!" – *Vanity Fair* nominates *The Osbournes* to its Hall of Fame, December 2002.

Background

On March 5, 2002, MTV debuted *The Osbournes*, a "situation reality program" (MTV 2002). The show's premise is much like that of one of the network's other hits, *The Real World*, except that instead of seven strangers living in a house having their lives taped, heavy metal singer Ozzy Osbourne is under the camera's scrutiny along with his wife Sharon, daughter Kelly and son Jack. (Older sister Aimee declined to participate). The family curses constantly, causing a barrage of "bleeps" from the network's censors. After watching one episode, one becomes used to the almost rhythmic pace at which the profanities fly. Brother and sister bicker and fight, screaming for Mom or Dad once the quarrelling becomes too much. Father Ozzy is trying his best to run the household, but his slurred British accent and slow, shuffling pace just add to the humor of everyday situations like taking out the trash or a pet soiling an antique rug. Mother Sharon manages Ozzy's career as well as the entire family and is the true disciplinarian.

According to MTV President of Entertainment Brian Graden, “MTV has a tradition of creating innovative television forms and *The Osbournes* continues this tradition by showcasing musical talent in unexpected ways and breaking the reality and sitcom genre molds” (“MTV Presents” 2002).

While one could dismiss a statement like this as the bombastic hyperbole of publicity, Graden was correct in giving the network credit. *The Osbournes* became an immediate sensation – the “unexpected way” MTV showcased musical talent was by showing that a rock-and-roll family is *just like yours*.

It is currently the highest-rated show in MTV’s 21-year history. Sitcom dad extraordinaire Bill Cosby denounced the clan on *Access Hollywood*, saying they were a “sad, sad family. It is a sad case. The children are sad and the parents are sad. And this is not entertainment,” (Battaglio 2002, 113), while former Vice President Dan Quayle praised the show for its family values. Rosie O’Donnell would chat with her guests about it during the last few months of her talk show. “Sharrunnn!” is now an American catchphrase. One can buy all kinds of *Osbournes* merchandise, including mugs, T-shirts, notebooks and even bobble-head dolls. In addition, the family has spoofed its success in a skit at the Emmy Awards with host Conan O’Brien as well as in Mike Myers’ third installment of the Austin Powers film series, *Austin Powers in Goldmember*. *The Osbournes* even won an Emmy for Outstanding Nonfiction Reality Program.

If the Emmy for Outstanding Nonfiction Reality Program existed back in 1973, chances are PBS’ *An American Family* would have won. The 12-part documentary, which debuted on January 11, 1973, followed the Loud Family of Santa Barbara, California, for a period of eight months in 1971. What happened in those eight months

included eldest son Lance coming out on television, daughter Delilah's budding heterosexuality and parents Bill and Pat agreeing to divorce. The eight months of footage was whittled down to 12 one-hour episodes that aired over a three-month period in 1973. "Are you ready for *An American Family*?" PBS' newspaper advertisement asked readers.

Though often prompted by the publicity packets sent out by PBS station WNET, the press used the Louds as an example of what was wrong in 1970s American family life (Ruoff 2002). The show became a springboard for journalistic discourse on the family. A similar phenomenon has occurred with *The Osbournes*. A 2003 print ad for *Time* magazine features a photo of the family with the caption: "Have the networks finally bitten the head off family values? Join the conversation."

The print media use these "real life" television families as a way to discuss American family values. As the *Vanity Fair* quote above notes, Jack and Kelly Osbourne are "representative" American teens, regardless of their upper-class stature and British accents. Instead of conducting in-depth investigations of American familial life, media use these TV clans as shorthand to illustrate "typical" American life.

Objective and Justification

Drawing upon myths of family and the "American dream," this thesis examines press reports regarding *An American Family* and *The Osbournes* to examine how the concept of family is framed in the media. Initially I wanted to analyze family values within the programs themselves, but after some difficulty trying to get a hold of episodes of *An American Family*, I chose to analyze the coverage. That stumbling block helped me realize that the press coverage is just as important a text to examine. Many people get their information about popular culture artifacts from other forms of popular culture. For

example, my mother has never seen an episode of *The Osbournes*, but she knows whom Ozzy and Sharon are, and that they constantly curse. She didn't learn that by watching the show; she learned it by reading about *The Osbournes* or watching other television programs that discuss the program and family.

My other reason for choosing to look at *The Osbournes'* and *An American Family's* press coverage is strictly subjective. Prior to my graduate study, I was an entertainment writer for several national websites and magazines. My experience with celebrity journalism gives me a personal perspective into how these kinds of stories are conceived and written. I do not claim my experience is universal to all entertainment writers, but I do have firsthand knowledge of the celebrity journalism process, from conception to publication.

While analysis of coverage of news events is common, the same scrutiny is not given to entertainment or popular culture events. These texts are crucial ones to examine, because they are so pervasive. And when such supposed "fluff" is being used to show the audience how they are supposed to live their lives, it is even more important to analyze and discuss these issues. By learning how our image of family is constructed, we can become more media literate and aware of mythology that exists all around us.

In this study, I attempt to answer the following research questions:

- What are the characteristics of the news coverage of *An American Family* and *The Osbournes*?
- What are the differences and similarities between the coverage of the two shows?
- Are the family and American dream myths present in the coverage of *An American Family* and *The Osbournes*?
- Do print media use shows such as *The Osbournes* and *An American Family* as a way to discuss family values? If so, how?

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

While there have been numerous studies of press reports regarding news events, there are little or no studies on how the press covers popular culture phenomena such as *The Osbournes*. No studies were found on the press coverage of reality television. Meanwhile, as reality television becomes a more pervasive genre, the press surrounding it increases. This coverage has the potential of fueling consumption of this genre, which makes it a necessary object for study. In addition, it projects and extends the shows' discourses.

Television Families

There have been numerous studies conducted regarding fictional television families. However, no studies about non-fictional families were found.

In her study of images of the family in mass media, Wahlstrom (1979) states that media reflect cultural values, but offer as much variety and as little offense as possible. "Many of the images the media offer are formulaic, oversimplified, and interchangeable from one medium to another, but we cannot deny their impact both on our ideas of family life and on family life itself" (226). Taylor (1989) takes this idea further, arguing that television's representational narrative aspect attempts to convince viewers that the medium reproduces the viewer's own experiences:

Television articulates social values; presenting shifting pictures of the ordinary frames of family and work that are filtered through rules of form emerging from the changing world views, daily priorities, and routines of producers, network executives, and advertisers, and then filtered again through the varied perceptions of viewers (14).

Numerous content analyses have been performed on fictional television families. Dail (1988) performed a content analysis of older Americans in television families. Those over the age of 55 were portrayed more favorable than those who were approximately the age of 55. Family conflict was the subject of Comstock and Strzyzewski's (1990) analysis. Situations involving jealousy, envy and rivalry were found to be common predicaments in sitcoms, and that these problems are depicted in a pro-social manner. Moore (1992) studied the presentations of conventional (two-parent, married) and nonconventional (single parent, those not married) families. He found that the male family role was often exaggerated, while wealthy families were prevalent.

Scharrer (2001) focused on the portrayals of fathers. Her study suggested that modern TV fathers and working class fathers are more likely to be portrayed foolishly than those of the past or fathers of higher socioeconomic classes, and that these portrayals can be linked to social climates. Harwood and Anderson (2001) examined familial portrayals across a variety of gender, age and ethnic backgrounds. They found that family conversations were relatively infrequent on network television. Older adults and women were portrayed as more involved with family than with other characters. Harwood and Anderson also found no differences across ethnic lines.

In their studies of audience reception of television families, Douglas and Olson (1995) found that working class families are perceived as more dysfunctional and that family life and relationships in domestic comedies didn't deteriorate over a 40-year period. A year later, these authors found that audiences perceive that television children in domestic comedies have changed over the course of 40 years (Douglas & Olson 1996). There is more conflict and less cohesion in between parents and children, as well as

between siblings in modern-day TV families, as well as greater trouble managing day-to-day life. Olson and Douglas (1997) also investigated how gender roles were perceived in television families during a 40-year period, discovering a fluctuation in perception of equality, similarity and dominance. In both the 1950s and mid-1980s, ratings of satisfaction and stability with gender roles peaked.

Morgan, Leggett and Shanahan (1999) tested the hypothesis that TV encourages viewers to embrace alternatives to two-parent families. They compared attitudes about single parenthood and illegitimacy to television viewing. They found support for the hypothesis that television may contribute to the loss of so-called “traditional family values,” such as support and acceptance of the traditional, two-parent family.

The literature on television families runs the gamut from discussions of the representational properties of the televisual medium to studies of audience perceptions. The breadth of research illustrates the pervasiveness of the concept of family on television.

Reality TV

Since reality television’s emergence in the ‘90s, several scholars have attempted to define the genre. For instance, Kilborn (1994) cited the following criteria:

RP [Reality programming] will involve (a) the recording, ‘on the wing’, and frequently with the help of lightweight video equipment, of events in the lives of individuals or groups, (b) the attempt to simulate such real-life events through various forms of dramatized reconstruction and (c) the incorporation of this material, in suitably edited form, into an attractively packaged television programme which can be promoted on the strength of its ‘reality’ credentials (423).

He also predicted the popularity of such shows, “Any programme format which combines the twin virtues of relatively low production costs with high ratings potential is likely to thrive in today’s broadcasting ecology” (436).

Dangerous events, unusual situations or actual police cases are components of Nichols' (1994) definition of reality television. He also considers it a perversion of the documentary form:

The webs of signification we build and in which we act pass into fields of simulation that absorb us but exclude our action. Referentiality dissolves in the nonbeing and nothingness of TV (52).

Robins (1997) sees the genre as “karaoke television.” “The intention moreover is that we should relate to the image as to the object itself. In reality television, the structure of representation is giving way to the simulation of presence” (140).

Dovey (2000) examined different studies on reality television and found them divided into two camps: those that argue that the political economy of television inevitably leads to trash TV and those that argue that reality television is a democratizing form which brings everyday life into the public sphere. Dovey, in his definition, chooses to “relate the Reality TV regime to a wider consideration of the political position of the individual subject under neo-liberalism, in particular to the ways in which personal responsibility for risk avoidance is structured as a model of citizenship” (79).

The advent of programs such as *Big Brother*, *The Real World* and *Survivor* has expanded the genre. Fetveit (2002) defines these types of shows, those in which strangers are placed in some sort of situation and filmed, as “experiment TV,” maintaining that reality television is a genre “depicting physical drama on location rather than emotional drama produced in the studio” (134). Fetveit’s term “experiment TV” hasn’t come to prominence in the mainstream press, which still tends to refer to these shows as reality television. Perhaps this is because reporters are still getting used to reality TV and aren’t ready to embrace another genre.

In addition to their attempts at defining this emerging genre, scholars have produced a limited, yet varied scholarship on the subject. For instance, Orbe (1998) examined issues of representation of African-American males on *The Real World*. Mhando (2000) analyzed how reality television socializes its audience. While Bourdon (2000) argued that the “liveness” aspect of these shows influences the televisual text, implying nonfiction and, ultimately, “truth.”

Wong (2001) argues that Foucault’s panopticon metaphor is not the way to look at watching *Big Brother*. Not only is there surveillance in choosing to watch the program, but also audiences are exercising power over themselves by choosing to watch.

Andrejevic (2002) looked at the production aspects of reality programming, an angle not specifically explored before. He interviewed cast members and producers of MTV’s *Road Rules*, a show that portrays surveillance not as social control, but as the democratization of celebrity.

While there still seems to be a struggle in how to define reality television, the genre is now “legitimate” enough to warrant further study. The examinations of production, reception and representation in these programs show that the form has established itself as influential. Now that reality television is a substantial part of popular culture, how the press covers this aspect of pop culture is a significant and necessary object of study.

Press Coverage of Television Shows and Families

While the press frequently writes about television, few works have studied the press coverage that television shows generate. Children’s television is one of the more established subjects examined in the field. Aday (1998) studied how newspaper coverage

looks at children's television programming, concentrating on the agenda-setting aspect of the search for "quality" programming for kids. The issue was accorded different levels of importance in different sections of the newspaper. Children's programming was largely ignored in entertainment sections, while weekend and news sections covered children's programming issues relatively well. In Europe, Nikken and Van Der Voort (1999) conducted a content analysis that examined how television critics in the Dutch press reviewed children's programs over a decade.

McAllister (2002) looked at how television news covered the last episode of the sitcom *Seinfeld*, noting the blurring between news and entertainment. He found that stations with connections to *Seinfeld*, be they NBC affiliates or channels that showed syndicated reruns, were likely to cover the final episode more extensively. McAllister's study illustrated how corporate interests influence news coverage. Although not strictly about how the press covers a television show, Moseley and Read (2002) examined the postfeminist sensibility of *Ally McBeal* and compare it with the feminist backlash in the British and American press.

In the realm of family coverage, Chambers (2000) discussed representations of the family in British popular media and briefly examines the "morality tale" (204) often used in the journalistic narrative to define family values. Often this is done in the press by pointing out a deviation from familial norms and defining it in an "us against them" fashion.

Representation and agenda setting seem to be the main subjects explored in research on press coverage of television shows and families. No studies have involved reality television press coverage.

The Louds and the Osbournes

The Osbournes have generated a fair share of mainstream press, as did the Louds in their heyday. Now that *An American Family* is considered one of the original reality television programs, scholars are reconsidering the show. Ruoff (2002) took note of this in his comprehensive history of *An American Family*, which examines the documentary's conception, production and reception. *Film Comment* dedicated part of its November-December 1973 issue to study *An American Family*. Krueger (1973) analyzed the documentary and the criticism the family and the program received in the press. Ward (1973a) conducted an interview with Pat Loud about the filming process and the reception of the program. Ward (1973b) also discussed production aspects of *An American Family* in a roundtable interview with Alan and Susan Raymond and John Terry, who were part of the production team responsible for the day-to-day filming of the Louds. These three articles each touch upon the media criticism the Louds and the series received, but it is not the crux of pieces.

Pat Loud, the mother in *An American Family*, wrote about her experience appearing on the program and the criticism that followed in her 1974 autobiography, *Pat Loud: A Woman's Story* (Loud and Johnson, 1974). Son Lance Loud (1991) wrote an article about PBS' decision in 1990 to rerun the series.

MTV has released two official books on its reality TV family, *Officially Osbourne* (2002) and *Bark at the Moon* (2002) – a book about the family pets. There are also numerous unauthorized books on the clan. Since *The Osbournes* is a recent show, it is understandable that scholarly work on the program is not yet available. Given the

show's success, more research should proliferate, as should research on the Louds as they continue to get their due as forbears of the reality television genre.

CHAPTER 3

THEORY AND METHOD

Theory: Mythology, Family Values and the American Dream

Mythology is omnipresent in media and in everyday life. While many may only strictly consider myth as tall tales regarding strange deities and half-man/half-animal creatures, the definition has broadened through the years. Eliade (1963) sees myth as any kind of tale regarding creation, “it relates how something was produced, began to *be*. Myth tells only of that which *really* happened, which manifested itself completely” (6). Jung sees myth as something ingrained within the collective unconscious, archetypes that have existed before culture even existed (Eliade 1990). Barthes (1993) defines myth within the realm of speech, as a way of communicating, not a message itself: “Myth is not defined by the object of its message, but by the way in which it utters this message: there are formal limits to myth, there are no ‘substantial’ ones” (109).

Rowland (1990) is critical of mythic criticism, claiming that much of it is actually using myth to analyze texts that don’t really have mythical components and defines the concept thus:

Myths are stories which symbolically solve the problem facing the society, provide justification for a social structure, or deal with a psychological crisis. Myths possess a unique power to symbolically “solve” social problems not possessed by other symbolic forms, because the rules of discursive logic do not apply in a mythic story. In fact, in myth, inconsistent events may both be true (103).

Like Rowland’s assertion that myth creates societal order, Lule (2001) sees it as a way to direct human behavior. Lule’s (2001) definition is the one I use for this project, and his work on journalism’s mythological role is the framework for this analysis. Lule defines

myth as “a sacred, societal story that draws from archetypal figures and forms to offer exemplary models for human life” (15). Mythology allows us to make sense of our world through common tales and archetypes.

It is the mythology of family that the press perpetuates by covering *The Osbournes* and *An American Family*. This myth is defined by a two-parent, nuclear family that eats dinner and spends lots of time together and resembles the 1950s ideal of family. Gillis (1996) sees this ideal as false and historically inaccurate. He notes that this nostalgia trap has perpetuated throughout history. While conservative critics today long for the days of the 1950s (and an ideal perpetuated by the domestic situations shown on television), that decade had its own critics who longed for the ideal families of the Great Depression era. In the 1950s, youth culture was threatening the 1930s family ideal.

The term “family values” evokes thoughts of conservatism in late -20th and early-21st century America, and this term is used to define the family myth Gillis writes about. Cloud (1998) examined the term’s use in the 1992 Presidential election and found it allowed Black men and poor Americans to become scapegoats for social problems. “The rhetoric of <family values> suggests that these problems are not structural features of capitalist society, but rather are the product of personal family failures” (388).

Coontz (1997) wrestles with the definition of the term and the industry that sprung up around it (which, by the 1996 election was bipartisan) in her 1997 book, *The Way We Really Are*:

If “family values” are what we need to confront our most urgent social ills, what precisely does this phrase mean? Robert Knight of the Washington, D.C.-based Family Research Council says, “It’s a shorthand term for the channeling of sexuality into marriage and all that comes of that: family structure; parental responsibility for children’s education, welfare, and moral and spiritual well-being.” A leader of the New York-based Institute for American Values puts it this way: “Family values are how we live and what we believe regarding sexuality, marriage and parenthood.”

Obviously, how we live and what we believe about such issues are very important, but by this definition Mafiosa families could place high on the list of leading moral exemplars. After all, who believes more firmly in (female) premarital virginity, marital permanence, and taking care of one's own (6-7)?

Gillis (1996) also notes this narrow definition of family and family values, and the mythological power of the notion of "The Family" (as in, nuclear and together):

This idol of family life sustains our economy and dominates our politics, holding us hostage to the "culture wars" currently being waged in the name of family. When the self-appointed legislators of family values survey Western society, they see little but chaos and degeneration. The emotional appeal of this position is enormous, but it obscures the diversity of family forms and inflicts real pain on those who do not conform to a single, narrowly defined notion of family (238).

This mythology is unconsciously ingrained in readers. As Lule argues, myth seems natural so it is not questioned. We look to these families in the media to define our own family relations and to make sure that we fit the familial archetype. In this way, press coverage of families helps define the concept "family." We learn to identify family values through what we read in the press. When journalists write about the Louds and the Osbournes, they are writing about "the American family" using these TV families as archetypical examples.

Conboy (2002) expands upon this premise while discussing celebrity's usefulness to the press, arguing, "Celebrity and consumerism are used as conduits to everyday concerns of illness, crime and heartbreak" (180). Issues are much easier to discuss if journalists have a popular angle upon which to peg them. *The Osbournes* is a great way to talk about family communication and drug abuse, while *An American Family* was used to discuss divorce and homosexuality, as well as family (non)communication.

Like Rowland, Procter (1992) notes that one of myth's purposes is to organize and sustain societal order. In American society, one of the greatest myths that serve this

purpose is that of the American Dream. Fisher (1973) sees two components to this important myth: “the rags to riches, materialistic myth of individual success and the egalitarian moralistic myth of brotherhood” (161) a myth that is “grounded on the puritan work ethic and relates to the values of effort, persistence, playing the game, initiative, self-reliance, achievement and success” (ibid).

Winn (2000) looks at the American Dream as defined in the 1988 film *Working Girl* and notes a contradiction within the myth itself:

Individual Americans must deal with negotiating their own economic conditions in the face of an overwhelming media image of Americans as prosperous and the nation exhibiting economic opportunity for all. The image of the U.S. as the booming land of the American Dream requires the mediation of two competing myths. The first myth asserts that Americans are limited only by their personal ability and drive to succeed. This myth posits that no structural class limitations unfairly hinder an individual in the U.S. and implies that the U.S. is a classless society. The second myth, the materialistic myth of the American Dream, places upward mobility as the collective goal of our nation. Rationally, the American Dream requires that classes must exist in order for upward mobility between classes to occur. Therefore, these contradicting myths must be rhetorically conjoined in an acceptable manner, so that America can be both a classless society and the land of the American Dream (40-41).

Perrucci and Wysong’s (2003) definition of the Dream falls within the same parameters:

“The American Dream is predicated on the belief that humble class origins are not destiny. It is grounded in the faith that American society offers equal and unlimited opportunities for upward mobility for those who embrace a strong work ethic, regardless of class origins” (41-42).

Shapiro (2001) writes that while television may show more varieties of families in its programming these days, there are still the old archetypes that exist. Their power is actually greater because they can produce a historical consciousness through reruns. Perhaps this consciousness is what reporters are using to discuss the family values in *The Osbournes* and *An American Family*.

Methodology

I am using textual analysis to examine press reports regarding both *An American Family* and *The Osbournes* from four sources: *The New York Times*, *TV Guide*, *Time* and *Newsweek*. I've chosen these particular publications because all of them were publishing in both 2002 and 1973.

Lule (2001) discusses the *Times's* influence in *Daily News, Eternal Stories*:

As the United States's leading newspaper, the Times has particular influence. As the national paper of record, the Times leaves an imprint for the future. As State Scribe, the Times must be carefully watched for the ways it might degrade and demean those who threaten the state (79).

The Osbournes and the Louds don't necessarily threaten the state, but in the case of the Osbournes, their perceived subversiveness is part of their appeal. That the newspaper of record wants to cover them is significant.

Time and *Newsweek* are also more of an elite form of journalism. Fiske (1996) refers to the two newsweeklies as "official" news:

It presents its information as objective facts selected from an empiricist reality wherein lies a 'truth' that is accessible by good objective investigation. Its tone is serious, official, impersonal and is aimed at producing understanding and belief. It is generally the news which the power-bloc wants the people to have (47).

TV Guide is a more popular form of print media and covers television. It provides a contrast to the elite coverage and will look at both the programs and families from the context of the individual television shows. In their analysis of the publication, Altschuler and Grossvogel (1992) note that *TV Guide* has had the highest circulation of any publication in the United States. They also discuss the magazine's significance beyond circulation:

At the most basic level *TV Guide* helped Americans define the possibilities and limitations of television and understand the entertainment industry as a business and an art form. In doing so, inevitably it has provided information and analysis of political issues and cultural trends, assessing them as depicted on television and experienced in “the real world” (xi).

For each time period, I have examined press reports from the week before each show aired (so that I could include any sort of “preview” piece that may have run the week before a program’s premiere) until six months from the show’s premiere date. *An American Family* ran for three months, so there are fewer reports after the show went off the air.

Since the Louds were only on television for three months, I chose to focus on *The Osbournes*’ first season to provide a comparable number of articles to analyze. Even by restricting the time frame, the number of articles on the Osbournes were approximately double the number of articles on the Louds for each show’s respective time period. *The New York Times* ran eight articles mentioning the Louds and 22 mentioning the Osbournes. *Time* featured two articles on the Louds and five on the Osbournes, while *Newsweek* had four stories on the Louds and five on the Osbournes. *TV Guide* published nine stories on the Louds and 12 on the Osbournes.

The use of LexisNexis searches probably increased the numbers for the Osbournes as well, since any article mentioning the family in passing would have come up in my search. LexisNexis doesn’t have *New York Times*, *Time* or *Newsweek* articles from 1973 in its database, so I relied upon *The New York Times Index* and the *Reader’s Guide to Periodical Literature* to look up *An American Family* and the Loud family. To find the *TV Guide* articles, I read through the table of contents of issues for the six-month period of each show and found the articles. I also attempted to skim through more general articles to find mentions of the Louds and the Osbournes.

Once I obtained the articles, I categorized them as interviews, reviews, news, letters and miscellaneous. The interviews and reviews were found to be the most fruitful for my analysis. I read through these articles several times to pick up any pattern in the discourse in regard to family and family values and noted any recurring themes, which included interfamilial communication, affluence, social issues (Ozzy Osbourne's substance abuse and Lance Loud's homosexuality) and discussion of how audiences relate to these real families.

The analysis concentrates mainly on pieces that discuss the two shows in terms of family values and how the characters (for lack of a better word) interact as a family. Many of the articles about *The Osbournes* that weren't as useful for the analysis included stories about negotiations for a second season and the merchandising glut that occurred in light of the program's success. I chose to omit analyzing any discussion of Sharon Osbourne's colon cancer (which she announced she had in July 2002) because the event didn't occur on the show until the second season, and there wasn't a comparable event in the Louds' life to compare with it. Loud family articles that I read but didn't use in the analysis mainly consisted of news stories announcing their appearances on television. I used a greater proportion of *An American Family* articles than I did of *Osbournes* stories.

CHAPTER 4

ANALYSIS

The volume of articles on the Osbourne family (49 articles mentioning the family) in the six-month period analyzed is nearly double that of those on the Loud family (23 articles) from its respective period. Numerous explanations abound for this increase in ink between the two reality television families: the greater interest in celebrity in 2002 as opposed to 1973, the speeding up of information because of the internet and 24-hour news channels, Ozzy's pre-television fame, reality television's establishment as a genre by 2002, and *The Osbournes'* comedic appeal.

Celebrity culture is more prominent in the mainstream press than it was in the 1970s. Television "infotainment" programs such as *Extra*, *Entertainment Tonight*, *E! News Live* and *Access Hollywood* clutter the pre-primetime landscape with their reports on the minutiae of the personal and professional lives of famous folks such as Brad Pitt and Jennifer Aniston, Ben Affleck and Jennifer Lopez, and the Osbourne clan. Internet gossip sites also provide information on a nearly instantaneous basis.

The availability of such information only further fuels the desire for it, therefore adding to the glut of articles about the Osbournes as opposed to the relatively fewer concerning the Louds. As popular culture feeds upon itself, a phenomenon becomes more pronounced. Jay Leno makes a comment about Ozzy during his *Tonight Show* monologue, *TV Guide* picks it up in its "Worth repeating" section of TV quotes, and the joke is disseminated to a whole new audience. Awareness of Ozzy and his family

spreads, and curiosity grows. Editors notice this curiosity and implore their writers to write articles about the clan. With 24-hour news networks and internet sites desperate to fill the news hole, stories proliferate.

Another reason *The Osbournes* probably received more press than *An American Family* is because prior to the television show, father Ozzy had a successful career as a rock musician. He was the original lead singer of seminal heavy metal band Black Sabbath back in the 1970s and had solo success in the 1980s and early 1990s. Osbourne's career had tapered off a bit in the late 1990s, but he still was performing annually as part of the Ozzfest, a rock festival masterminded by wife and manager Sharon.

Osbourne's heavy metal career was mired in infamy. He had bitten the head off a dove during a record company meeting, bitten the head off a bat in concert (he claims he thought it was a fake) and was arrested for urinating on the Alamo while wearing a dress. These sensational stories make for great copy and help bolster Ozzy's madman image.

The Loud family, meanwhile, didn't have the press interested in their antics prior to the filming of *An American Family*. They were seen as a typical upper-middle-class family from the California suburbs, which was part of the appeal for television series. As famed anthropologist Margaret Mead wrote, "Bill and Pat Loud and their five children are neither actors nor public figures going through a public charade. They are members of a real family, deeply concerned with each other, and each concerned with his or her individual, immediate fate" (1973 62).

By the time *The Osbournes* hit the airwaves in March 2002, reality television had had experienced a boom in popularity which had been growing throughout the past decade. MTV's *The Real World* is still one of the network's more popular shows despite

it being on the air for 11 years and its novelty wearing thin. *American Idol* is a consistent ratings winner for Fox and receives much tabloid and mainstream press. In the 1970s, a show such as *An American Family* was a programming anomaly. These days it would quickly fit into many a network schedule and would probably generate more press. The curiosity factor of *An American Family* couldn't match the reality fever that gripped the United States in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Now that reality television is an established genre, there is a built-in audience for the programs and for press about the shows' stars. Now, there even is an Emmy award for Outstanding Nonfiction Reality Program, which *The Osbournes* won in 2002.

Finally, *The Osbournes* is a comedy. MTV calls it a "situation reality" program ("MTV Presents" 2002). *An American Family*, meanwhile, was a documentary for PBS. Later, *An American Family* was called a soap opera in the press, although that really wasn't the producers' intention with the series. The comedic appeal of *The Osbournes* may also help its popularity in the press – it had more of a novelty quality. Much of the coverage regarding the Louds centers on the question of *why* the family agreed to be filmed. The justification for shooting wasn't as necessary for the Osbournes. They were seen as entertaining, true performers. *An American Family* was supposed to be a "serious" documentary, but was received as serial melodrama, a national soap opera played out on PBS.

The Nuclear Family vs. The Broken Family

Much of the coverage of *The Osbournes* paints them as the ideal nuclear family. In the family's first interview with *TV Guide*, Sharon notes, "It's not like we've done this to show the world what a great, amazing family we are" (Rhodes 2002 55). Despite Sharon's lack of intention to show the Osbournes as a shining example of family values, the press mainly embraced the clan as the return to a '50s nuclear family ideal.

Poniewozik (2002b), who calls the program "Rock-'n'-roll fantasy meets take-out-the-trash reality," (64) explains the appeal of the show in the context of television tradition:

But in a broader sense, what MTV has done right is a case study in what TV often does wrong. *The Osbournes* is the oldest thing on TV since the test pattern: a nuclear family that eats meals together, shares its problems (even if every third word is bleeped) and survives wacky scenarios (ibid).

James (2002a) describes the show as "a hilarious real-life version of 'The Addams Family'" (E8). Comparing the family to either the Addams, Munsters or Clampetts (from *The Beverly Hillbillies*) is common shorthand in coverage of the show. Another way to establish the family in sitcom terms is to compare Ozzy Osbourne to '50s TV dad Ozzie Nelson, since Ozzy vs. Ozzie has such great pun potential (Peyser 2002, Stanley 2002).

Other critics aren't as willing to praise the Osbournes for their lifestyle. Cohen (2002) refers to *The Osbournes* and *The Anna Nicole Show* as "the real life travails of people who have – how to say it – something just a bit wrong with them" (sec. 4, 18). Cohen considers Ozzy and his brood as having an "aberrant home life" (ibid) and that their purpose for being on television is to perform because they are stigmatized. Cohen's argument is rooted in Erving Goffman's *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, which Cohen describes as a "compelling case that most people are actually desperately insecure

about who they are and are constantly putting on little performances designed to present acceptable selves to the world” (sec. 4 18).

In the first episode of *An American Family*, the audience learns that over the course of filming, the Loud family breaks up. (Mother Pat asks father Bill for a separation in episode 9). This fact colors much of the coverage of the Louds, painting them as a failure almost instantly. On the cover of *Newsweek*'s March 12, 1973 issue is a family portrait, with a sash covering the *Newsweek* logo that reads “The Broken Family.” The cover story is a series of articles on divorce in 1970s America, including an article declaring the Louds' breakup as “The Divorce of the Year” (“The Divorce” 1973 48-49). *Newsweek*'s first article on the Louds notes, “the almost casual disintegration of the Louds' twenty-year marriage is equally familiar” (“An American Family” 1973 68).

Articles discussing both the Osbournes and the Louds cite interfamilial communication as an integral part of keeping a family intact. Regarding the Osbournes, much discussion abounds about the family's unorthodox method of interacting: its incessant cursing. With the Louds, writers note the distinct *lack* of communication, their silence when confronted with any difficult issue, be it Lance's homosexuality or Bill and Pat's divorce.

The “bleeping” that one hears throughout an episode of *The Osbournes* adds a comical rhythm to the program. At some times, it seems as if more than half of the dialogue is replaced with a high-pitched beeping tone. It's something that makes the show distinctive, and the press (and Ozzy) took no notice of it instantly.

“It's like 25 minutes of bleeps,” [Ozzy] says, surprised if not necessarily ashamed. “It's like, ‘Good f---ing morning. How the f---ing hell was your f---ing night's sleep?’ We live

in Beverly Hills, and we sound like we should live in a f---ing trailer park” (Rhodes 2002 55).

James (2002a) refers to the family’s cursing as “affectionate shorthand language”

(E8), while *TV Guide* critic Matt Roush (2002a) admits:

Between their accents and the constantly bleeped cursing, it’s often tough to decipher what they’re saying. What’s unmistakable is the weary affection they share for one another, especially for poor addled Ozzy (10).

The underlying message is that the family that swears together apparently stays together.

Critics also laud the Osbournes for discussing their problems honestly. *TV Guide*

(“Cheers&Jeers” 2002a) gave the show a “Cheer” in its “Cheers&Jeers” section for its family values:

But sometime around the fifth or sixth episode, *The Osbournes* started to seem less “This Is Spinal Tap” and more *An American Family*. When Mom and Dad sat the kids down for a heart-to-heart about underage partying, the so-often-fuzzy Ozzy stopped the show with words blunt and loving: “It ain’t gonna lead to anywhere but bad places. Look at *me*.” Subsequent episodes have been just as bracing. This is a show that catches you off guard. Believe it (12).

MTV president Van Toffler noted to the *New York Times* that this communication is greatly responsible for the program’s success. “There is something about their nuclear family, about the way they relate to each other, the juxtaposition of the freakiest, weirdest human being over the last 20 to 30 years thrust into the most traditional family situations of rearing children and loud neighbors that you can’t duplicate or plan for” (Kuczynski 2002 Sec. 9 P. 1)

In a *New York Times* article, *Blender* magazine editor Craig Marks also notes that the family is close despite its profanity. “They genuinely seem to love each other, and they call each other the worst names in the world” (Stanley 2002 E1). The use of quotes from such “experts” as the president of *The Osbournes*’ network and the editor of a music

magazine give even more weight to the idea that in media terms, the Osbournes are a close, nuclear family.

On the other end of the spectrum, press reports of the Loud family criticize them for the consistent lack of discussion about anything important in their lives. *Newsweek's* second article on *An American Family* is entitled “The Silence of the Louds” (Alexander 1973) and refers to their reticence. “And so the silence of the Louds is also a scream, a scream that people matter, that they matter and we matter. I think it is a scream whose echoes will shake up all America” (28). Alexander also notes in the piece that the Louds truly are a chatty bunch, “but tend to clam up when they are face to face” (ibid).

This glibness is also mentioned in Harrington’s preview of *An American Family*:

And all of the Louds—except Bill, who comes off as more of a square—are a combination of sophistication and provincialism that expresses itself in glib patter full of one liners that enables them to talk to each other without ever saying anything (1973 D19).

Other critics see this as a characteristic of an American family, not just the Louds of *An American Family*. *Newsweek* called it “the peculiarly American trait of avoiding unpleasantness at all costs” (“An American Family” 68). Even *An American Family* producer Craig Gilbert feels the need to note the Louds’ lack of communication. “They communicate. But they don’t communicate about the bad stuff. That’s the way we are as country, and that’s what this series is about. We can’t ever admit that we have made a mistake” (“Sample of One?” 1973 51).

Anne Roiphe, in her scathing *New York Times Magazine* article discussing the series, notes that Pat “reacts with what has come to be recognized as a family characteristic, a desire to calm down, smooth over, pretend everything is all right” (1973 8) when she goes to visit eldest son Lance in New York City and is subjected to his

bohemian, homosexual lifestyle. Roiphe also refers to Bill as “uncommunicative” (50) and writes that “He avoids any direct confrontation with what’s bothering him in others, and certainly there is not an iota of introspection” (47). This is in stark contrast to the critical praise of the Osbournes’ swear-and-bare-it-all approach.

By the time *Newsweek* declared Pat and Bill Loud’s split as “The Divorce of the Year” (“The Divorce” 1973), criticism of the family had become self-referential. The cover story notes that some critics of the series considered their lack of communication the central problem the family suffered. Within two months, “the Louds don’t communicate” became an important facet of the press mythology surrounding *An American Family*.

While the Osbournes are lauded and the Louds are criticized, it becomes apparent that communication is an important family value in regard to the coverage of both programs. What the Louds failed to express, the Osbournes do, clearly and profanely, and critics took notice.

If we are to believe the press reports, communication (or lack thereof) is the key ingredient for the success of a family as a nuclear unit.

Affluence

The Osbournes are wealthy – one look at their mansion in Beverly Hills during any given episode of their television program will show you that. Ozzy and Sharon have made a great living off his heavy metal antics and her shrewd business sense. Yet if one reads much of the press surrounding the family and the television show, one would notice that many of the stories gloss over the fact that the Osbournes are incredibly affluent. An offhand remark, such as “Of course, this home has a huge red-carpeted staircase out of

‘Gone With the Wind’ and crucifixes as an essential part of the décor,” (James 2002a) is the typical kind of allusion to the family’s material wealth – they are not rich, just a little odd (and they just happen to live in Beverly Hills). This is especially prevalent in the number of articles that mention that one of the boxes coming out of the moving truck in the series’ first episode is labeled “Devil Heads” (Rhodes 2002, Poniewozik 2002a, James 2002a, Peyser 2002a, Stanley 2002). It is not ridiculous that Ozzy and family are wealthy enough to have an entire devil head collection; it is more notable for how kooky that collection is.

Just as there is a contrast between discussion of familial communication in coverage of *The Osbournes* and *An American Family*, the discussion of affluence in regard to the Louds is very different from that discussion in reports on the Osbournes. Many of the first articles about *An American Family* rattle off the Louds’ material possessions as if the writers were making a list for an extensive estate sale. Readers learn that the Louds’ Santa Barbara home features a swimming pool and a recording studio. The Louds have four cars (including a Jaguar), three dogs, and a horse (Harrington 1973, “An American Family” 1973, Alexander 1973, O’Connor 1973a and 1973b).

While the Osbournes’ wealth is barely mentioned, it is also hardly questioned. In contrast, O’Connor (1973b and 1973c) twice points out that while the Louds’ image might be that of “toothpaste-bright affluence, California-style” (1973b 69), it is also “wobbling precariously on a foundation of credit cards” (1973c 19). Wealth is noted as another one of the factors that drives this family apart. Roiphe (1973) calls the Louds’ swimming pool “a fetid swamp breeding a kind of fly that gives us all a fatal case of cultural malaria” (54). In the case of criticism of the Louds, consumption is a bad thing.

When combined with the Louds' inability to communicate with one another, *Newsweek* ("An American Family" 1973) notes that *An American Family* "is both a starkly intimate view of one family struggling to survive a private civil war—and a scathing commentary on the American domestic dream" (68). What readers can glean from such articles is a classic cliché: money cannot buy happiness. No matter how many cars you own, lacking a true connection with your family will not keep you together.

The Osbournes, however, do not receive the same kind of criticism for their materialism. An expensive 17th birthday party for Kelly is not criticized for its extravagance, instead it is noted as a moment of comic hilarity because Ozzy spends much of the party trying to yell at guests for smoking or complaining loudly about the techno music (Rhodes 2002). One writer goes as far as to call the family "subversively middle class" (Stanley 2002 E1). There is nothing middle class about someone living in a mansion in Beverly Hills, unless the person in question is live-in hired help.

Perhaps the reason writers tend to ignore the Osbournes' wealth is because the family isn't portrayed as incredibly boastful about their material success. (Although more conservative critics may decry that Kelly and Jack act like spoiled brats, but many of those stories write off that behavior as MTV's attempt to achieve sitcom convention with the children.) Familiarity with Ozzy Osbourne's background as a working class kid from Birmingham, England may also contribute to the lack of contempt for their wealth. Ozzy *earned* that mansion in Beverly Hills in the eyes of the press. It is the classic American "work hard and you shall prosper" mythology. The Louds, meanwhile, come from an upper-middle-class background (Pat was Stanford-educated, Bill is the president of his own company) and are perceived in the press as born into their affluence.

Troubled Family Members

Both *The Osbournes* and *An American Family* feature in their televisual narratives issues that family-values commentators love to argue about – substance abuse (*The Osbournes*) and homosexuality (*An American Family*). These sensationalist aspects of each respective program are exactly the kind of topic that newspaper critics love to “peg” a story on. Controversy engrosses readers, and discussion of these topics is prevalent in coverage of both of these programs.

Substance abuse was bound to come up in coverage of *The Osbournes*. Ozzy is notorious for his drug and alcohol abuse, and the years of drinking and drugging have clearly taken their toll on him. Many a late-night comic has received a laugh by cracking wise about how hard it is to understand Ozzy’s slurred speech. Critics also take notice.

Roush (2002) describes the program as “a sidesplitting docu-sitcom hybrid that invites us inside the hectic Hollywood manor of Ozzy Osbourne, whose hard-rocking days have left him a dazed, baffled bystander to his life” (10). Poniewozik (2002b) elaborates upon this description, noting that Ozzy’s past provides a specific subtext to the comedy of the show:

The unspoken context of *The Osbournes*’ humor is that Ozzy’s problems were not always of the how-do-you-work-the-remote variety; he has talked voluminously about his substance-abusing past. Now he tells his kids to say no to drugs and use a condom if they have sex. Whether that is hypocrisy or wisdom, even boomers whose wild life was limited to coughing through half a doobie in a parking lot can relate to Ozzy’s situation in a way that re-examines that most political phrase, “family values” (64).

Despite this subtext, there is still an entertainment value to watching Ozzy pattering around the house, and to further illustrate this, Stanley (2002) uses the comments of heavy-metal musicians in her review of the show, which lends some authenticity to the argument. If Ozzy’s musical brethren can laugh at him, it must be OK:

At times Mr. Osbourne's slurred speech and trembling hands make him seem more like a dotty pensioner than a Prince of Darkness, but even heavy-metal purists do not seem to mind the de-demonization of their idol.

"It's so hilarious to watch Ozzy take three minutes to put a liner in his trash can," Brian Fair, 26, a member of a thrash metal group, "Shadows Fall," explained. "I don't think his fans have any illusions," said Doc Coyle, lead guitarist of the metal band God Forbid. "Everybody knows his brain is fried" (E1).

Osbourne's brain may, in fact, be "fried," but that only fuels the press's desire to cast him as a charming hero, a beleaguered father eager to teach his children about the consequences of substance abuse. If there ever were a poster child for not doing drugs, the shaky, oft-incoherent Ozzy Osbourne is it. Critics are eager to point this out, as *TV Guide* did in its "Cheers&Jeers" section ("Cheers&Jeers" 2002), which commended Ozzy and Sharon for sitting down with Jack and Kelly and discussing the children's excessive partying in one episode.

Caryn James (2002b), in her *New York Times* article discussing the sideshow nature of reality television (mainly in reference to E!'s *The Anna Nicole Smith Show*), writes about the lessons learned from watching *The Osbournes*: "One lesson of 'The Osbournes,' after all, is that the new, loving television family can like sex and rock 'n' roll but not drugs" (E1).

Beyond Ozzy Osbourne's "do as I say, not as I do" school of avoiding drug addiction, another narrative that plays out in the coverage is that of his redemption. Despite his hard partying, Ozzy is redeemed because he is on television. *The Osbournes* has catapulted him from just another rocker who made it to the top only to tumble down because of addiction (as has just about every subject of VH1's *Behind the Music*) to America's most loveable TV dad. This is "the cautionary tale of Ozzy Osbourne, who

shakes and stammers as though alcohol were the melon baller and his brain the melon”

(Klinkenborg 2002 A38). Despite the damage, he is now:

so well paid and so well loved for being what’s left of you after years on the road. Now that ‘The Osbournes’ is such a smash, we should never ever again hear the old F. Scott Fitzgerald line that there are no second acts in American lives. Ozzy Osbourne is all second act, a second act that began in 1979 when his band, Black Sabbath, fired him for the very excesses that have made him who he is today. It may turn out that what Fitzgerald meant is that there are no second seasons in American lives, though everyone at MTV and in the Osbourne family (except the older daughter, Aimee, who isn’t participating) hopes otherwise (ibid).

It is all right that Osbourne had to struggle with addiction, because now he is on television, and by showing the audience that there’s a lesson to be learned from his personal battles, he is redeemed.

In press reports regarding *An American Family*, Lance Loud, the eldest of the Loud children, is beyond redemption. Lance’s homosexuality isn’t something that can be “cured” like Ozzy’s drug addiction, although some reports see it as merely a “phase.”

Anne Roiphe is the most critical of Lance’s sexual orientation. In “Things are keen but could be keener” (1973), she refers to Lance as “the evil flower of the Loud family” (8), “the devil” (8) and describes his homosexuality as “leech-like” and his actions in front of the camera as “camping and queening about like a pathetic court jester” (9). Roiphe even goes as far as to blame Lance for his father’s infidelity, claiming that Bill’s realization that “his first son was not going to be a man” (47) pushed the father to pursue other women as a way to assert his masculinity. Roiphe’s comments touched off a debate in the letters section of the *New York Times Magazine* for a few weeks, including one from the president of the Gay Activists Alliance asking her to define “leech-like homosexuality” and “backward genders,” and which then denounces her as a

bigot (Voeller 1973). Another readers commended her for singling out Lance as an example of the family's failures (Selz 1973).

Most of the other articles mention Lance's sexuality in passing, but almost always label him as the "homosexual son." Some see it as a sort of "club" that he has joined. *Time* ("Ultimate Soap Opera" 1973 36) referred to his move to New York City as a migration "to join the gay community." *Newsweek* ("The Divorce" 1973) interviewed Lance, and "he bitterly described himself as 'Homo of the Year'" (49).

Some of the coverage regarding Lance and his homosexuality seems to be that of the family doing damage control. In the same article in which Lance claims the title of "Homo of the Year," Pat Loud tells *Newsweek* of her concern for Lance. She also does this in *TV Guide*, where she appears to be in denial of her son's true nature: "I didn't know exactly how he'd be when I met him in New York. I wasn't really worried. Many boys go through homosexual episodes, but only a few become confirmed homosexuals as adults" (Gunther 1973a 7).

In 1970s America, homosexuality seems to be beyond redemption. Up until the last interview, the Louds were attempting to either defend Lance or explain his lifestyle. Unlike Ozzy's redemption via television, Lance suffered a demonization via the medium. His taboo lifestyle hadn't evolved into a comedic puttering about – it was portrayed as something he needed to consistently explain or for which he had to apologize.

Relating to the Families

By allowing cameras to follow them around, both the Louds and the Osbournes allow the audience (and the critics) to gaze into their lives and search for some kind of greater meaning. Usually the audience doesn't seriously consider the subtextual issues,

but the critic will distill some meaning from these programs and present it to readers to ponder. In the case of these family reality shows, one of the bigger issues is how the audience relates to the families – are the Louds and Osbournes us? This question is asked throughout the coverage of both shows, and as with my previous findings, the answers for both programs are divergent.

One of the biggest factors in *The Osbournes*' appeal is how mundane and “normal” the family appears on television. The novelty, as well as the comedy, in *The Osbournes* stems from situations that are fodder for funny greeting cards: Dad's inability to work the fancy, hi-tech remote control, animals wreaking havoc. These scenarios allow members of the audience to nudge each other and proclaim, “It's funny because it's *true*.” Critics latched onto this concept. Poniewozik (2002b) dubbed it “rock-‘n’-roll fantasy meets take-out-the-trash reality” (64).

Coverage would like readers to think that their domestic lives are like that of *The Osbournes*. The press crowned Ozzy and Sharon the king and queen of American domesticity. First and foremost, the Osbournes are British. A *New York Times* article mistakenly referred to Jack and Kelly as American teenagers (Ratliff 2002b) and subsequently issued a correction five days later (“Corrections” 2002). The clan is framed as an American family, whether it's Klinkenborg's use of Ozzy to disprove F. Scott Fitzgerald's “no second acts in American life” declaration (2002) or the fact that President George W. Bush briefly roasted Ozzy at the 2002 White House Correspondents Association dinner and it made the papers (Bumiller 2002). The only time that the family's British nationality is truly identified in the press is to discuss (and usually mock) Ozzy's slurred, working-class-British-accented speech.

As discussed in the section on affluence, the Osbournes are wealthy, much wealthier than the average American. Yet writers emphasize the similarities between the Osbournes and most American families instead of pointing out the differences. Lines such as “watching the high priest of headbangers wrestle with the same problems—his wife, his two teenage kids, the cable TV—*as the rest of us*” (Peyser 2002a 64, emphasis mine) and “Soon dad is having trouble with the remote for the new television and *like any middle-aged father* has to call his teenage son for help” (James 2002a E8, emphasis mine) remind readers that Ozzy and his family are just like you, except for all that money and fame:

An MTV camera crew lived in their house for almost four months last fall and showcased Mr. Osbourne, the former lead singer of Black Sabbath, famous for biting off the heads of bats onstage, as a typical suburban dad. He cannot master the remote control, his unruly household or his wife’s menagerie of incontinent cats and dogs (Stanley 2002a E1).

The message is, “the Osbournes are like you and me, this is what the suburban American dream looks like.” Readers can aspire to the family’s riches and (more importantly, perhaps) fame. The ideal American family of 2002, according to these articles, is wealthy, communicative, famous, and British.

Readers may be encouraged to aspire to the family life of the Osbournes, but the Loud family’s life is one to be avoided at all costs. Unfortunately, many critics point out, the 1970s American family is deeply reflected in the Louds, and that reflection is not a pretty one, and part of *An American Family’s* appeal:

Depressing though the show may be, it may also be a big hit. Almost everybody will want to measure themselves against the Louds. Their candy-box ideal of “family” is something all Americans to some degree share. Why do we sacrifice so much on this altar? Why do we exhaust and consume ourselves in the struggle to create and maintain the nest? Partly we do it for the children, believing that in this way we can pass along the finest part of ourselves. But partly we do it for *us*, to prove that we have worth, that we are good (Alexander 1973 28).

Other articles want to remind the reader that the Louds are different, as *Time* did in its first story on the series:

In truth, the Louds are in some ways far from typical. For one thing, Bill Loud owns his own business, which sells replacement parts for strip-mining equipment, and his family is a whole lot richer than all but a small percentage of Americans. For another, the Louds permitted the filming. But anyone who has ever raised children or who can remember his own childhood will feel a shock of recognition seeing Gilbert's film ("Ultimate Soap Opera" 1973 36).

The other consensus amongst writers covering *An American Family* is one of reluctance to identify themselves with the Louds. O'Connor (1973b) pointed this out in a review of the series, but distanced himself by referring to "observers" and noting the presence of Loud-like people, although not allowing himself to be compared to the family:

Some observers have called it devastating, with the clear implication that they share no bonds with the Louds. That is nonsense. With innumerable variations, the Louds are all around us (1).

Roiphe, meanwhile, reluctantly admits that there exist similarities between the Louds and her family, and the mental disturbance that ensues:

The Louds are enough like me and mine to create havoc in my head, and I had to fight a constant strong desire to push away those Louds, dismiss them as unique, empty, shallow, unlike others, and yet on serious reflection, we can call learn from them, perhaps just enough to begin understanding that saddest of mysteries, the American family (1973 8).

Moreover, Roiphe explains the Louds' popularity (which, at the time, the family itself was having trouble grasping) was in terms of how families across the country related to them:

They have been exposed to public scrutiny in a way they never intended or expected, and a life involved with good appearances has been publicly questioned. But I wish they understood and could be comforted by the fact that they are not separate or different from the rest of us. Our fascination with them is an expression of their ability to symbolize the common dilemma (1973 51).

The most notorious depiction of the Louds as a typical American family is *Newsweek*'s cover story on divorce ("The Broken Family" 1973), which featured the Louds on the cover to represent "The Broken Family." Four out of ten couples marrying in 1973 would split (ibid), and the Louds brought the brutal truth of divorce into America's living rooms and got America talking. For writers, the Loud family was easy shorthand to discuss such a complex issue; much in the same way writing about the Osbournes was a quick way to celebrate the nuclear family. Through their televisual presence, the Osbournes and the Louds become the embodiment of family values, good or bad.

The press sagas of the Osbournes and the Louds can be seen as two sides of the same coin. Ozzy and his brood are the smiling, quirky, happy version of the American family. Sure, there may be fights, but it's all resolved in the end, and the clan's love for one another is never questioned. The Louds, meanwhile, silently grin and bear the implosion of their family unit. When Pat asks Bill for a divorce after he returns from a business trip, he quips, "Fair deal. I won't have to unpack my bag" ("An American Family" 1973 68).

The two narratives that emerge from each of these families both seem to say that family matters. The press coverage reinforces this by celebrating the Osbournes and vilifying the Louds. You see it in how communication, affluence, troubled family members and audience identification are written about for each series. *The Osbournes* is a comedy, *An American Family*, a drama, but the main reason for the Osbournes being held in a more favorable light is because they stayed together. If readers are to learn anything from the coverage of these two programs and their subjects, it's that familial togetherness

is important above all. You can have all the success in the world, but if you don't have family, that success is truly hollow.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

“The media sells it, and you live the role” – Ozzy Osbourne, “Crazy Train”

The Osbournes and the Louds as manifestations of myth

As reality television continues to emerge as a popular genre, press coverage of it and its programs will continue to proliferate. My analysis of the news coverage *The Osbournes* and *An American Family* suggests that these stories produce a mythology and statement about American family life. While the programs themselves construct a mythological definition of family, so does print coverage of the shows.

Rowling (1990) and Lule (2001) both see myth as a form of societal control, and the mythology present in press coverage of *The Osbournes* and *An American Family* supports that notion. Reporters create an image of an ideal family to which their readers can then aspire and possibly feel bad about themselves when they realize that their brood doesn't live up to the ideal presented in the news. In the case of *The Osbournes*, this ideal is a nuclear family that communicates well with each other (even if every other word is something most people wouldn't utter in polite company) and spends time together. There is glamour in their day-to-day lives because Ozzy is a wealthy rock star. By seeing him perform such mundane tasks as taking out the trash, watchers can believe that they are like this famous rock star in some way. When a reporter for an elite or popular publication such as *The New York Times*, *Time*, *Newsweek* or *TV Guide* points out that

the Osbournes are “just like us,” or a family ideal for one to aspire, this reinforces the notion that this is the family archetype one should follow.

This mythological reinforcement also occurs in coverage of the Louds, but it has an opposite effect. The press reports one reads about this family show readers how *not* to live. The Louds’ lack of communication is seen as a way of life to be avoided at all costs. Reporters try their best to distance themselves from this fractured family. The divorce of Pat and Bill Loud pegged the family as a failure, and writers were more than willing to point this out. By criticizing the Louds so fervently, the press coverage reinforced the notion that the nuclear family (that is, the mythological family of the late-20th and early-21st centuries) is truly the ideal and the alternative is best avoided unless one wants public ridicule. This example of what *not* to do provides a negative social control that’s just as powerful as the positive reinforcement one gets from reading that a wealthy, successful family is just like any other typical family. Twenty years from now, will conservative critics long for the days of *The Osbournes*, decrying the loss of “family values?” Perhaps.

Another mythology strongly present in the press coverage of *The Osbournes* and *An American Family* is that of the American Dream: work hard, prosper and transcend class boundaries that may or may not exist (it all depends on whether or not you’re on the “winning” side – live the upper-class life, and we’re all the same; life in a lower class might make one think otherwise). If these classes do exist, and I say that they do, as does Fisher (1973), we don’t really want to talk about them.

This is why Ozzy Osbourne can be seen as just another hapless dad. Acknowledging this affluence is considered gauche, which is why Bill and Pat Loud are criticized for their material wealth. It is, after all, built upon a precarious pile of credit

cards that could collapse at any minute. The Louds were reviled for their blatant pursuit of the American Dream, because when they attempted to grab the brass ring, they failed, and the family disintegrated.

Another manifestation of the myth as social control appears in the coverage of tough social issues: Ozzy's substance abuse and Lance's homosexuality. The press mentions of Ozzy's drugging have a fable-like quality to them: follow Ozzy's path and you too could turn out a shaky, stuttering old man who seems perpetually confused and who struggles for a while with the garbage can liners. If Ozzy were a tragic hero (which, these days, he may very well be), drugs and alcohol would be his Achilles heel.

Lance Loud's homosexuality, however, makes him a scapegoat in the eyes of the press. Roiphe (1973) goes so far as to blame the eldest Loud son for his father's infidelity. In the coverage, Lance is often portrayed as difficult and attention-starved. The subtext appears that if you are homosexual, you will be demonized and blamed for your family's problems.

The Osbournes, however, succeed in spite of themselves. The press roots for Ozzy because he's been through so much, and now he seems content to be a family man. Readers are encouraged to be like the Osbournes, because they seem *happy*. Their problems in the eyes of the press are problems that we wish we all had: dog poop and noisy neighbors are much easier to deal with than scrambling to pay the rent every month. The Louds' problems, meanwhile, are nothing that one would want to aspire to. The message is that family togetherness is important above all, entwining the familial myth and the American Dream together.

The press reinforces the notion of the mythological nuclear family by celebrating the Osbournes and vilifying the Louds. This sustains the notion that nuclear is the *true* family. This mythology is present and needs to be acknowledged. Media literacy education would help readers understand that writers perpetuate a myth when writing about these families. Granted, this myth is less harmful than many others out there, but it is still responsible for a social more that may make the considerably large contingent of the population with divorce in their families feel that their lives are inadequate. In the eyes of the media they, like the Louds, have failed.

Coverage of these families, however, does bring issues of home life into the national debate. By publishing these stories, periodicals bring the discourse on family to the entertainment section, a place usually reserved for television listings and celebrity puff pieces. Using famous families as an example helps with discussion, albeit a discussion that seems very one-sided, traditional and mythological.

Suggestions for further research

The Osbournes and *An American Family* are both programs that deserve further research consideration beyond the mythology in their press coverage. Research on how family and American Dream mythology manifests itself in the actual television programs would be a useful complement to the study of mythology in the press coverage. Another aspect worth looking into could be how less elite forms of the media covered the shows – a tabloid such as the *National Enquirer* and a gossip magazine such as *Us Weekly* may provide a completely different perspective on the programs.

Another facet of the press coverage that I wish I could have covered is the media portrayals of the family matriarchs, Sharon Osbourne and Pat Loud. From my cursory

readings of the press materials, Sharon Osbourne is more frequently covered in her “manager” role than that of mother, until she is diagnosed with colon cancer. The press on Pat Loud almost always pegs her as the breakout star of *An American Family*, despite Lance’s flamboyance and portrayal as the show’s “villain.”

While *An American Family* didn’t have a second season, *The Osbournes* so far has had two more, and the family just signed on for a fourth. A comparison of press coverage from later seasons with that of the first season media barrage could provide valuable insight into how a media phenomenon plays out. The Louds, however, appear in the 1983 HBO documentary *An American Family Revisited: The Louds Ten Years Later* (Ruoff 2002), and PBS aired *Lance Loud!: A Death in An American Family* in early 2003. The documentary followed Lance Loud through his final days as he died of AIDS in 2001. Analysis of these programs could examine how the audience of reality television identifies with these “characters” through the years. Is the audience as invested 10 years down the line? Why do the participants in these programs feel the need to be a part of these reunion programs – to set the record straight or to regain some time in the media spotlight?

Even if the Osbourne family fades into relative obscurity in the next few years as the Loud family did, *The Osbournes* will be remembered as a quirky little artifact of early 21st century television, much like *An American Family* is remembered as a groundbreaking piece of television. Given his current popularity, Ozzy Osbourne is more likely to be remembered as a real-life sitcom dad than as a musician. His now-mythological status far surpasses his considerable musical notoriety. It’s like a line from

his song, "Crazy Train," that the big-band TV-theme version of the tune omits: "The media sells it, and you live the role."

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FAMILY PATTERNS. The United States has many different types of families. While most American families are traditional, comprising a father, mother and one or more children, 22 percent of all American families in 1988 were headed by one parent, usually a woman. In a few families in the United States, there are no children. These childless couples may believe that they would not make good parents; they may want freedom from the responsibilities of child-rearing; or, perhaps they are not physically able to have children. A worry that too many families live in poverty. In one nationwide survey, about 80 percent of the Americans polled said the American family is in trouble. At the same time, when these people were asked about their own families, they were much more hopeful. Drawing upon the myths of family and the American Dream, this thesis examines how press coverage of two reality television shows, *The Osbournes* and *An American Family*, perpetuate the myth of the nuclear family. Articles from *The New York Times*, *Time*, *Newsweek* and *TV Guide* were analyzed. Thesis (M.A.)--University of Georgia, 2003. When asked about their family values, most people find it hard to formulate a response. The concept of values that pertain to a family unit is, in some respects, just that: a concept. These values are largely inherent, understood on an emotional level, unspoken and passed down through the generations based on personal experience. Everyone already knows that the word "family" means a social unit--whether blood-related, marriage-related or emotion-related--usually residing together. The word "values" typically means a set of beliefs and ideals (social and sometimes political) that provide moral guidance to a family unit. Most modern American families also include caring, love and support of the family into their system of values. Traditional and Modern American Family Values.