

Reality Check

March 22, 2005

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See: the world of reality television. The cast members bear little resemblance to your usual television actors (but they also seem quite unlike you and me). In exotic settings and high-stakes competitions, strangers are stranded and banded together, elevated to star status as long as they are willing to do and say things we could never imagine. Video editors whirl through raw footage, past the mundane, in search of incidental lusts or brawls. Promises are bound and broken in a single breath. Triumph is declared over enemies who, moments before, were friends who, days before, were strangers. True love may or may not be found, depending on whether the check is real.

Such is the world that has advertisers flocking, Juilliard graduates panhandling, and psychologists wondering whether life could ever come to imitate this peculiar art.

Reality television has been vilified as the lowest form of entertainment, a threat to intelligence, and catering to (and rising from) the most prurient of human instincts. As such, the shows would seem to offer a bounty of possible examinations from a behavioral perspective. But until recently, the effects of reality television remained sparsely explored. Bryant Paul, Indiana University, offers two explanations for the dearth of literature. First, reality TV is perpetually changing, making it difficult for researchers to collect and analyze data that remain relevant. The other reason is that some researchers do not think it will last. "It's been around three to five years, which is a blink in the bigger scheme," Paul said. "The novelty is wearing off."

If that is the case, losing popularity has never been so popular. Fifty-one million people tuned in to the first-season finale of "Survivor" in August 2000.*¹ In January 2003, reality shows accounted for 85 percent of the most valuable TV-advertising space in the United States, according to the Cable News Network. Competing plans for entire reality networks — Reality 24-7 and Fox Reality Channel — are in the works. The craze has even reached the classroom. James Hay, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, recently began teaching a course called The Reality TV Syndrome. "I'm often asked, 'Why would you want to teach in higher education the lowest form of television?' " Hay said. "But it's an important matter in everyday life."

And not all researchers believe the fad is fading. "I don't see any signs that it's going away any time soon," said Brad Waite, Central Connecticut State University, who presented reality television research at the American Psychological Society's 16th Annual Convention. "Something so ubiquitous must have an effect on behavior."

Passion for Peeping

Flip back to that first “Survivor” finale. As a frame of reference, 51 million viewers is more than watched the 1983 “M*A*S*H” special — the top Nielson-rated show of all time. (Nielson officially ranks shows by time-share and household percentage, however, so —M*A*S*H— still holds the top spot, and —Survivor— doesn’t even crack the top 100.) By watching in such high numbers, viewers told network executives to dump their high-priced writers and lovely actors in favor of identifiable people in familiar conflicts. All we really wanted to see was the same thing we saw in the mirror every morning — ourselves. Only different.

According to Waite, a writers’ strike loomed in Hollywood around this time. The airwaves were ripe for inexpensive replacements. After “Survivor,” previously impossible profits became, well, a reality.

“It is not difficult to imagine the difference in cost between a whole series where one person wins \$1 million and producing a series of ‘Friends,’ where each cast member earns that much each episode,” said James Wiltz, Ohio State University. “One big hit in this genre is worth many attempts.”

Network executives thought the same thing. The new strain of television soon spread throughout the viewing community, plagiarizing and mutating into myriad subgenres. But as the number of shows grew, so did the media criticism. A month before the “Survivor” finale, *Time* said we had a passion for peeping and that we enjoyed the suffering, mean-spiritedness, and humiliation endured by others. The *New Statesman* blamed not only reality viewers but also participants for the culture of voyeurism. Nearly a year later, a *Newsweek* headline read: “Another reality show, another IQ point disappears.”

It was all the negative publicity that motivated Robin Nabi to conduct some of the earliest research on why people watch. “The press suggested we’d reached an all-time low in taste,” said Nabi, a communications professor at University of California, Santa Barbara who takes a social-psychological approach to research. “It’s frustrating to see these claims not based on any data. I wanted to know if the claims were reflected in the general public.”

Why We Watch

The roots of reality television appear in the 1950s show “Queen for a Day,” in which women in dire circumstances competed for the studio audience’s sympathy to win fur coats and appliances. Prior to the end of the 20th century, most reality television research centered on the show “Cops,” which follows law enforcement officers on their daily beats. But unlike newer reality shows, people on “Cops” were not removed from their natural setting, and the research mostly addressed the show’s violence. “The Real World,” pioneer of modern reality TV, has aired since 1992, but for years there were too few shows like it to merit a study.

Researching after the turn of the millennium, it did not take Nabi long to debunk some of the criticism. In her *Media Psychology* report, “Reality-Based Television Programming and the Psychology of Its Appeal,” *² Nabi found the notion of reality watchers as voyeurs questionable at best.

“The idea of voyeurism didn’t bear itself out in the data. Viewers wanted to watch other people, but not to see something the characters didn’t want them to see,” Nabi said, noting that voyeuristic pleasure is undermined when the subject knows he or she is being watched. Besides, said Nabi, viewers are well aware that illicit activity is certain to be censored even if it occurs.

A year later, Ohio State University psychologist Steven Reiss confirmed the absence of voyeurism, though what he found instead was debatably worse. He and collaborator James Wiltz based their research on Reiss’s sensitivity theory, which says that most complex human motives can be reduced to 16 basic desires. Each time a desire is realized, a related joy is experienced. Though the motives are universal, they are individually prioritized to reflect our unique comportments, our personal Desire Profiles. Reiss has used these profiles to accurately predict spirituality, underachievement, teamwork — even organ donation.

According to Reiss, media events repeatedly allow people to experience the 16 desires and joys. Drawing on the uses and gratification theory — which suggests that people select media to fulfill certain needs — as well as the sensitivity theory, Reiss predicted that reality viewers would display a collective Desire Profile. Finding any difference from the normal profile would have been intriguing. What he and Wiltz found about the basic needs of reality viewers proved that truth is sometimes scarier than fiction.

Reiss’s data showed that the largest significant motive for watching reality television was social status, which leads to the joy of self-importance. Only slightly less strong was the need for vengeance, which leads to vindication. “Some people may watch reality TV partially because they enjoy feeling superior to the people being portrayed,” Reiss said. “People with a strong need for vengeance have the potential to enjoy watching people being humiliated.”

In a content analysis of the five most popular reality shows and the five top scripted dramas and comedies, Waite and collaborator Sara Booker confirmed that reality shows might reflect a desire for

viewing humiliation. Using show raters to code character behaviors, they found that reality shows rated higher in humiliation than scripted dramas. (This even after data from “The Swan” — a reality show on which a homely woman receives a makeover, only to then compete in a beauty pageant — was omitted.)

Humilitainment

Waite and Booker call this phenomenon “humilitainment,” the tendency for viewers to be attracted to spectacular mortification. Since their study, similarly indecorous shows have popped up like pockmarks on the genre. “Temptation Island” placed dating couples on opposite ends of an island resort and introduced tempters and temptresses whose main purpose, it seems, was to initiate philandering while wearing as little clothing as possible. Some titles alone are enough to evoke disgust: “I Want a Famous Face,” “Trading Spouses: Meet Your New Mommy,” “The Virgin,” and the ever-popular font of humiliation: “Who’s Your Daddy?”

Humilitainment has a more graceful and precise cousin — the German word *schadenfreude*, which translates to the pleasure one receives at the suffering of others. Colin Wayne Leach and Russell Spears studied *schadenfreude* as it related to an even more real type of reality contest — World Cup soccer matches. Looking at soccer fans’ reactions to their team’s losses and rival team’s victories, Leach and Spears found that *schadenfreude* was the result of threatened inferiority. In the wake of losing a competition, *schadenfreude* is “a covert form of prejudice that is used in the maintenance of self-worth,” the authors wrote in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*.

If reality viewers are in fact tuning in to feel better at another person’s expense, Waite predicts a maladaptive future for heavy watchers. “They expect it’s OK to humiliate and to be humiliated by others, instead of thinking there’s something wrong with this behavior,” Waite said. “The world they’re living in is different from others.” In this world according to Waite, the borders separating on-screen from off-screen blend indistinguishably. It is this seamless convergence of fiction and reality that psychologists fear could have a severe behavioral impact.

Real People, Real Problems

Each semester, Bryant Paul demonstrates the power of media to his psychology students. He asks how many of them have been to New York. Half raise their hands. He then asks how many of them perceive New York as a dangerous place. The students draw no connection to the previous response, and nearly all the hands are raised.

The theory Paul sets into action is not a new one. It has been around since the late 1960s, when media psychologist George Gerbner stated that exposure to cultural imagery can shape a viewer’s concept of reality. Simply put, the more TV a person watches, the more that person believes in the world of TV. Using his “cultivation theory,” Gerbner showed that heavy news viewers believed they resided in a “meaner” world, to the point where they might even approve stricter violence interventions.

“In general, one of the negative things about television is that it gives a distorted image of what the rest of the world is like,” said APS Fellow and Charter Member Craig A. Anderson, Iowa State University, who focuses mostly on violent media but sees some overlap with reality shows. “TV changes the perception of what is normative.”

Mary Beth Oliver, a communications professor at Pennsylvania State University who researches the

psychological effects of media on viewers, also wondered what happens when this mean world is a real world.

“I thought the perceived reality would have a strong impact on viewers’ social-reality judgments,” said Oliver, who studied “Cops” long before the reality boom. Her analysis of crime shows found that African Americans and Latinos were overwhelmingly cast as criminals and whites as police officers. In addition, police were using aggression frequently, particularly if the criminals were minorities.

“Reality television requires viewers to disengage from the suffering of other people or to derive enjoyment from it,” Oliver said.

To test how greatly these shows were actually influencing worldviews, Oliver asked regular watchers to estimate the prevalence of crime in the real world. Startlingly, reality crime watchers gave increased crime estimates, particularly for the amount of black crimes. Yet Oliver’s most unsettling realization came from a phone call she received from an officer in charge of training at a Roanoke, Virginia police department. The man had read her research and was very nervous, because every trainee who wanted to sign up for the force was addicted to these reality crime shows.

“He told me it wasn’t just for the enjoyment,” Oliver recalled. “That’s what they thought policing would really be like.”

The blurry line between fiction and reality should come as less of a surprise considering that the godmother of reality television, Mary-Ellis Bunim, was an executive producer for the soap opera “As the World Turns” before creating “The Real World” with partner Jonathan Murray. Bunim’s obituary in the December 26, 2004 *New York Times Magazine* said her idea was to “craft soap-opera storylines with actual people.”

Fulfilling this idea requires a luxury unavailable to normal reality — heavy editing. “The Apprentice” and “Survivor” each shoot for almost a month and a half, turning 1,000 hours of life into about 15 hours of programming. “The Real World,” reality’s longest shoot, tapes for five months before producing two dozen episodes. Many researchers, including Paul, find this manipulation problematic.

“Reality TV is just as real as anything else on TV — it’s not,” Paul said. “They can create any impression they want. One-eighth of an hour one time a week is all viewers get to construct an opinion about a character.”

Douglas Gentile, director of research at the National Institute on Media and the Family and psychology professor at Iowa State University, agreed that reality TV’s presentation has a large influence on viewers. “One of the things we know from media violence research is that the more realistic the presentation is, the media violence effect seems to be stronger,” Gentile said. “Reality TV is claiming it’s real, even though there’s a striking lack of resemblance to what’s really happening in the world. But the average viewers, who aren’t as savvy to know how the shows are being produced, are being told that what they’re seeing is true.”

In addition to how the shows are marketed, rumors linger that cast members exaggerate their behavior and that producers instigate conflict. According to Booker, the character Toni from “Paradise Hotel”

admitted letting her rage get the best of her on camera. The villainy of Omarosa from “The Apprentice” seems nothing more than shrewd self-promotion — she still frequents gossip-columns a year after the show’s end. Gentile has a clinical term for the insults and antics that come so naturally to reality characters: relational aggression.

“A lot of reality television is very relationally aggressive,” he said, describing the term as *I’m having a party and you’re not invited*. “Not only do the characters interact unpleasantly to each other, they also spread rumors. This is a classic example of relational aggression — trying to gang up, enhancing one’s own status by bringing others down.”

Anderson has seen some evidence that relational aggression does not always stop with words. “Relational aggression frequently escalates into physical aggression,” he said. “Many assaults occur between acquaintances, when name-calling escalates beyond saying nasty things.”

Waite fears such consistent, ignominious behavior will lead to a modified re-creation of Gerbner’s “mean world.”

“Is the world of the heavy viewer of modern reality TV a ‘mean world’ but in a different sense?” he asked. “Is this ‘mean world’ one in which embarrassment, disrespect, and degradation are common? This to me is one of the most interesting reasons why we study this type of programming.”

Improving Reality

If reality television does persist, psychologists may in time grow to understand more about its allure. Waite and Gentile both said that video game users have been recently hooked up to functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging machines; whether for marketing or empirical purposes, reality viewers might not be far behind. Until then, Waite speculates that younger generations are simply accustomed to being on screen. Digital cameras now come standard with most cell phones, and Web cams televise daily adventures, from the quotidian to the erotic, around the clock. “Expectations of privacy have been eroded,” Waite said. “Public disclosure, even of formerly private behaviors and feelings, are the expectation.”

This intimacy entitlement might explain why 37 million people tuned in after the “Survivor” finale to watch the reunion. Miles away from the island of Pulau Tiga, plain-clothed cast members discussed their feelings and opinions on the experience. To Reiss, this suggests that these once-regular people now hovered somewhere between the celebrity and pedestrian echelons.

“If you pay attention to ordinary people then you’re saying ordinary people are important,” he said. “People can watch reality TV shows and see ordinary people like themselves become famous, win cash prizes, and move up in their status.”

Paul disagrees that a desire to be famous attracts viewers — after all, he says, these people can be famous for you. Rather, the fact that these people were not groomed for celebrity in the traditional sense, that friends of friends invariably went to camp with someone on one of the shows, is the great draw. —The closer someone is to you, the easier it is to empathize,— Paul said, —and really good empathy equals really good television.—

Nabi stumbled onto this possibility when she found almost as much variety among preference for reality subgenres as she did preference between reality and fiction. In some cases, the very quality that defined one show's enjoyment was anathema to another's — suspense was a draw for reality talent shows, but for a reality crime show it was a major detractor, perhaps because the viewer wondered if the criminal remained at large. To Nabi, this could mean that watching real people, whatever the circumstance, is the real attraction.

“Watching real people on TV is fascinating, just like watching people in the airport is fascinating,” she said. “Viewers are interested in people — not pain.” This leads her to think that some of the negativity directed toward reality TV may be unjustified, but it does not solve the riddle of why viewing real people is such an attraction. “Something deeper is happening here that we haven't gotten to.”

For the time being, Nabi sees a positive side to viewer malleability and the scientific evidence supporting it. “It is possible that the way producers put their programs together may be influenced by the academic research,” she said. In fact, she has already seen an improvement in the way some reality shows depict real events. Previously, “Extreme Makeover” was criticized for making plastic surgery seem beneficial, rapid, and risk-free. In its current season, however, Nabi said the show more clearly depicts the multiple, intensive steps involved in surgical procedures.

An altruistic show even lurks on the horizon — “The Scholar,” in which 10 exceptional and financially-needy high school seniors from around the country will compete for a full scholarship. “Imagine this concept,” wrote Booker at the end of her second study, “using reality television to actually improve reality.” Given the genre's impact on behavior, that might not be too unrealistic.

Reference

Reiss, S., & Wiltz, J. (2004). Why people watch reality TV. *Media Psychology*, 6, 363-378.

*¹ Nielsen Media Research. (2000). *Report on television*.

*² Nabi, R. L., Biely, E. N., Morgan, S. J., Stitt, C. R. (2003). Reality-based television programming and the psychology of its appeal. 2003. *Media Psychology*, 5, 303–330.

The Reiss Profile

In their 2004 report “Why People Watch Reality TV,” published in *Media Psychology*, lead author Steven Reiss and James Wiltz used the Reiss Profile to explain why certain people watched reality television. Validated by responses from over 10,000 people, the Reiss Profile measures how basic motives result in a particular joy. Reality viewers were found to have significantly higher motives for status and vengeance.

Motive

Acceptance: Desire for approval

Curiosity: Desire for knowledge

Eating: Desire for food

Joy

Self-confidence

Wonderment

Satiation

Family: Desire to raise own children	Love
Honor: Desire to obey a traditional moral code.	Loyalty
Idealism: Desire to improve society (including altruism, justice)	Compassion
Independence: Desire for autonomy	Freedom
Order: Desire to organize (including desire for ritual)	Stability
Physical Exercise: Desire to exercise muscles	Vitality
Romance: Desire for sex (including courting)	Lust
Power: Desire to influence (including leadership)	Efficacy
Saving: Desire to collect	Ownership
Social Contact: Desire for peer companionship (and desire to play)	Fun
Status: Desire for prestige (including desire for attention)	Self-importance
Tranquility: Desire for inner peace (prudence, safety)	Safe, relaxed
Vengeance: Desire to get even (including desire to win)	Vindication