The Unreal Real World of Reality Television

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Ordinary citizens are deposited in a wilderness setting where they form tribes and battle each other in a series of “immunity challenges.” A group of gorgeous young women vie for the affection of an attractive young man whom they believe to be a millionaire but who is actually a construction worker. Another young woman dunks her head into a tank to bob for rings that are floating in 50 gallons of cow’s blood.

Every night during prime time—those magic hours between 8 and 11 p.m., when more people in the U.S. are watching television than are engaged in any other single activity—these are the images and stories that the networks parade before us in the guise of the latest hit genre: “reality television.” Think about that designation for a moment. Reality TV. Hmmm, last time I checked, my “real” life was nothing like that. I haven’t hooked anyone up to a lie detector lately, I try to avoid having tarantulas crawl on my face whenever possible, and the last time I was flown to a desert island was...oh yeah, never.

Yet we tune in, episode after episode, week after week, in such great numbers that television producers are climbing over each other in their haste to put the next “Survivor” or “Joe Millionaire” on the air.

All of this because, in the strange world of commercial television, the only thing that matters is that we watch. It doesn’t really matter what we watch. Or, to be more accurate, that those of us who fit the profile that advertisers most desire—young, affluent, urban, or suburban—watch in numbers large enough to justify charg-
bers large enough to justify charging upwards of $1 million for a 30-second commercial spot. The first thing that we all should understand about commercial television is that the real reality of television is advertising. The rest is just filler designed primarily to get our eyeballs directed at the screen. Our time is the real product that is being sold in the television marketplace. It simply doesn’t matter whether the news informs us about what is going on in the world or whether situation comedies make us laugh. As long as we watch.

And watch we do. Reality shows are frequently the top-rated programs in the Nielsen ratings. This system, despite ridiculously small samples skewed toward wealthier Americans, determines the fate of television programs. One rating point can mean literally millions of dollars of profit or loss for a network. Profit is the key here. In addition to their high ratings, television executives love reality shows because they are relatively inexpensive to produce. In an age when the biggest TV stars are demanding weekly salaries that resemble Powerball payoffs, it’s easy to see why the networks would take a group of mail carriers and flight attendants, drop them off in a house somewhere in an undisclosed location, and just let the cameras roll.

Embracing Unreality

As long as we keep tuning in, the networks will keep devising more and more unreal schemes that they can sell to us as “reality.” But why do we keep tuning in? Why do we embrace unreality that is packaged to us as reality? Well, let’s consider real reality for just a moment. In the last several years—a time frame that coincides with the rise in popularity of these sorts of unreal reality programs—what has the real world brought to American citizens?

A contested presidential election. An economy that is flaccid, with no apparent good news in sight. A devastating terrorist attack that forced us to realize that we no longer live in a secure bubble. A war on Afghanistan. A war on Iraq. A war on...who's next? And now the rise of a new epidemic that has airline passengers wearing masks while they are being strip-searched and patted down by airport security personnel.

Tarantulas on your face are starting to look pretty good in comparison, no? When the real world seems so dreary and bleak, is it any wonder that we yearn for a different sort of reality? The unreal reality offered to us night after night after night as this genre continues to rise in popularity is comforting in a way. After all, the trials and tribulations of the latest “Survivor” tribe are really silly and humorous in comparison to the trials and tribulations that most of us must confront in our daily lives.

Central Storyteller of Our Culture

But are these programs completely harmless? Are they just mindless entertainment, a momentary escape?

Despite many conflicting theoretical perspectives and contradictory results, decades of media research have taught us this: there is no such thing as just entertainment. Something else is always going on when we watch television. It offers us a vision of the world, moral lessons, and information and ideas that we would otherwise be unlikely to encounter. Most of us spend more time with television than we do interacting with our friends and families or in educational, religious, or fraternal institutions. As media scholar George Gerbner has pointed out, television has become the central storyteller of our culture, the primary source of much of what we know or think we know.

So what vision of the world do most of these reality programs offer us? Primarily, it is a world of humiliation, ridicule, and greed. Contestants are insulted for flaws in their personal appearance on programs like “Extreme Makeover” or “Are You Hot?” (In the latter program, one judge used a laser pointer to highlight problem areas on the contestants’ bodies.) Over and over again, people appear in dangerous or degrading situations—usually in a fierce competition for material gain. After all, the program was called “Who Wants to Marry a Millionaire?”—not “Who Wants to Marry a Real Person Who Will Love Them, Treat Them with Respect, and Allow Them to Find Happiness?”

In most of these programs, one person emerges as the Ultimate Winner, and the rest drag themselves home as Pathetic Losers. And we continue to watch, squirming during the really disgusting moments, laughing at other people’s misery, peering through the keyhole as people “just like us” are humiliated for our viewing enjoyment. Then we turn off the set and return to the real real world—a world of dwindling bank accounts, bombs and battalions, and...oh yeah, SARS. Welcome to the 21st century.

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