

Reality TV

Is it harmless entertainment or a cultural threat?

In the blink of an eye, it seems, reality television has become a certifiable global pop-culture phenomenon. Critics generally dismiss it as a crude form of entertainment that appeals to the lowest common denominator, but reality television's high ratings and ability to create pop culture icons (and its low production costs) are undeniable. While "unscripted" reality television shows have replaced many scripted shows, the genre has been tarnished by accusations of racism and stereotyping. Questions have also been raised about reality television's social value — or lack thereof — and its ability to distort young viewers' perception of life. The genre has also been rocked by real-life scandals that mirror the wild antics the shows encourage to boost viewership. While reality TV has repeatedly been called a superficial cultural fad, it continues to grow, leaving many television writers and cultural commentators worried about its impact on mainstream TV entertainment.



Nicole "Snooki" Polizzi and other "Jersey Shore" cast members have amused and outraged millions of MTV viewers with their antics. The show's second season debut drew 5.3 million viewers and was the highest-rated cable broadcast of 2010 among young viewers.

INSIDE THIS REPORT

THE ISSUES	679
BACKGROUND	686
CHRONOLOGY	687
CURRENT SITUATION	692
AT ISSUE	693
OUTLOOK	695
BIBLIOGRAPHY	698
THE NEXT STEP	699

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THE ISSUES

- 679 • Has reality TV caused a coarsening of society?
 • Does reality TV perpetuate harmful racial, gender and other stereotypes?
 • Does reality TV distort how young viewers perceive life?

BACKGROUND

- 686 **In the Beginning**
 “Candid Camera” began surprising real people in 1948.
- 688 **Rise of Modern Shows**
 Fox’s “Cops” began trailing real police on busts in 1989.
- 689 **The Last Decade**
 CBS launched the U.S. versions of “Big Brother” and “Survivor” in summer 2000.

CURRENT SITUATION

- 692 **Going Too Far?**
 The First Amendment offers wide latitude on content.
- 694 **Legal and Regulatory Action**
 The focus of state and federal initiatives is on child labor, indecency and embedded advertising.

OUTLOOK

- 695 **Technology and Creativity**
 Shows in 3-D could be around the corner.

SIDEBARS AND GRAPHICS

- 680 **Reality TV Gets ‘Worst’ Rating**
 Most Americans think reality TV has changed society for the worse.
- 681 **Americans Prefer Sitcoms Over Reality TV**
 Twice as many Americans watch sitcoms.
- 684 **‘Idol’ Is Most Popular Prime Time Show**
 The Fox talent show averaged 23 million viewers.
- 687 **Chronology**
 Key events since 1939.
- 688 **Straight Talk From a Reality TV Producer**
 “Young, attractive people behaving badly always works for television.”
- 691 **Will ‘American Idol’ Finally Win an Emmy?**
 Judges dislike shows featuring trashy players like ‘Jersey Shore.’
- 692 **Watching Reality TV With a Critical Eye**
 Viewers must remember, “It’s not reality, it’s entertainment.”
- 693 **At Issue**
 Can’t we just sit back and enjoy reality TV?
- FOR FURTHER RESEARCH**
- 697 **For More Information**
 Organizations to contact.
- 698 **Bibliography**
 Selected sources used.
- 699 **The Next Step**
 Additional articles.
- 699 **Citing *CQ Researcher***
 Sample bibliography formats.

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BY MARYANN HAGGERTY

THE ISSUES

After six seasons of gossip, bikinis, plastic surgery, hook-ups and break-ups, “The Hills” came to an end on July 13. For one last time, its beautifully lit, beautifully shot, beautifully blonde young female stars agonized over their mid-20s life crises and shared their dreams for the future.

Kristin Cavallari, who has spent much of her life in front of MTV’s cameras on “The Hills” and its predecessor reality soap opera, “Laguna Beach,” told her friends she was ready for a clean break. Her on-again, off-again affair with hunky Brody Jenner was off, and she wanted to start anew in Europe. On the day she appeared ready to leave for the airport, Brody was outside her home.

There were tears and hugs, but she got into the waiting black SUV. Brody — the son of Olympian Bruce Jenner, stepbrother to the flamboyant Kardashian sisters, boyfriend of singer Avril Lavigne, star of at least two other reality shows of his own — watched her go. The iconic Hollywood sign loomed in the hills in the far background.

Then the cameras pulled back. Stage hands scurried. Viewers saw — in reality, as it were — that Brody was standing on a Hollywood back lot.

It was, show creator Adam DiVello said afterwards, a “wink” to viewers, an acknowledgement that this particular series has been regarded as the most staged of reality television. That wink came 10 years after “Survivor” — generally considered the show that changed TV — first appeared on U.S. broadcast television on May 31, 2000.¹



Getty Images/Kris Connor

Bravo’s “Real Housewives” franchise targets a narrow demographic of 30-to-49-year-old women. Above, four of “The Real Housewives of D.C.” Two other cast members, Michaele and Tareq Salahi, allegedly crashed a White House state dinner during casting for the show. In other versions of “Housewives,” women have screamed, turned over tables and appeared in sex videos.

Ever since “Survivor,” reality television has been an easy target for those who see it as a harbinger of cultural decay. It’s dismissed as lowbrow and routinely slammed for being unreal. Critics say it eats up air time and job opportunities that otherwise would be available for better-quality scripted shows. Nonetheless, it has grown into a multibillion-dollar industry — talent show “American Idol” alone brings in \$500 million in ad revenue, the trade paper *Variety* estimates.²

Much is indeed shocking or vulgar. Jon and Kate Gosselin, who were raising their children onscreen in “Jon and Kate Plus Eight,” ended up in a messy divorce that played out in the tabloids. In Col-

orado, Richard Heene, whose family had been on “Wife Swap,” was convicted of staging the “balloon boy” hoax after he falsely reported that his 6-year-old son, Falcon, had floated away with a Mylar balloon. Michaele and Tareq Salahi, vying for roles on “Real Housewives of D.C.,” allegedly crashed a White House state dinner. In other versions of “Housewives,” women screamed, turned over tables, and showed up in sex videos.

Some developments are even more troubling. Ryan Jenkins, a contestant on VH1’s “Megan Wants a Millionaire,” was found dead, seemingly a suicide, after he had been sought in the murder of his ex-wife. The network pulled the show. Adam “DJ AM” Goldstein, a recovering drug addict who starred in MTV’s “Gone Too Far,” which dealt with addiction and recovery, died of an overdose a few days after shooting wrapped. The episodes aired several months later, in late 2009.

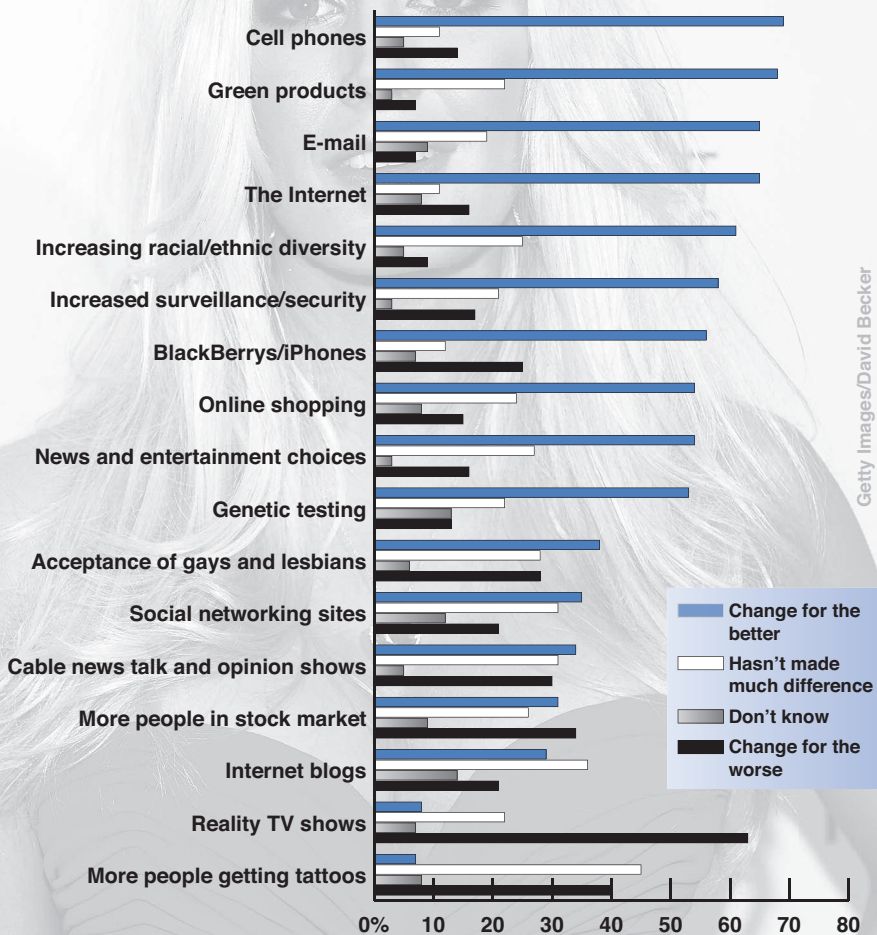
And in Detroit, this past May 16, Aiyana Stanley-Jones, age 7, was killed during a police raid that was accompanied by cameras from the A&E series “The First 48.” The girl’s family is suing the police. In July, Detroit’s mayor fired Police Chief Warren Evans, reportedly in part because of Aiyana’s death.³

“Reality television” is an umbrella term that lumps together hundreds of programs. They can be classy. “Brick City,” a five-part show that aired on Sundance, sensitively explored the obstacles and aspirations of the people of Newark, N.J. They can be trashy. Not too far away, in Seaside Heights, the young partiers of “Jersey Shore” amused and outraged millions on MTV with their crass attitudes and hot tub escapades.

Reality TV Gets ‘Worst’ Rating

A higher percentage of Americans think reality TV has changed society for the worse than more than a dozen other recent technological and social changes.

Opinions on Technological and Social Changes



Source: "Current Decade Rates as Worst in 50 Years," Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, December 2009

Who knew a lifestyle could be summarized as "GTL" — gym, tan, laundry? Entire channels are filled with cooking shows or programs that teach people how to decorate, how (not) to dress and how to buy and sell real estate. Audiences follow the lives of crab fishermen and cupcake bakers, as well as minor celebrities known mostly for being on other reality shows.

Realscreen, a trade publication for the non-fiction film and television industries, in 2010 presented its first Factual Entertainment Awards. A recurring industry complaint is that television's Emmy Awards lump all reality shows together, explains *Realscreen* editor Barry Walsh. "Things like 'Antiques Road Show' are up against 'Dirty Jobs' and 'Kathy Griffin: My Life on the D

List.' Those are three very different shows."

His magazine split its awards into subgenres, with separate awards for design, food or home programming, as well as best docureality ("Brick City"), best docusoap ("Gene Simmons Family Jewels," A&E), best competition/lifestyle ("The Biggest Loser," NBC), best competition/talent or studio ("RuPaul's Drag Race," Logo), and more.

For both broadcast and cable networks, the forces driving reality programming are economic. Simply put, reality is cheap.

In a scripted drama, actors must be paid, along with writers and the rest of the creative team, points out Marc Berman, a television analyst with *Mediaweek*, a trade publication. "It's expensive to do, even as opposed to, say, 'Survivor.' On 'Survivor,' the winner's getting a million dollars, the second runner-up is getting \$100,000. If you add up salaries for actors on a scripted series, it's going to be a hell of a lot more than a million dollars," he says.

At the time "Survivor" debuted, the top broadcast drama, "ER," cost an estimated \$14 million per episode, according to pop culture observer Robert Thompson, a professor at the S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications at Syracuse University. " 'Survivor' is not cheap, but it's sure cheaper than that," he says.

The economics are especially attractive for cable channels, says Doug Gomery, resident scholar at the Library of American Broadcasting at the University of Maryland. To fill their schedules, "they make what I call cheap shows — shows that track a very small audience, but that audience is valuable." A show where people try on bridal gowns won't draw blockbuster crowds, but it will draw advertisers seeking brides-to-be.

Something like Bravo's "Real Housewives" franchise, he says, is reaching out to a narrow demographic of 30-to-49-year-old women. "Their mothers used to watch soap operas."

While some “Housewives” have agents, they don’t have a union, unlike the soap operas. And while even the most popular reality shows don’t do well in reruns, they don’t need to. “They don’t make a lot of money, but they make consistent money,” Gomery says.

As that finale of “The Hills” teased, both fans and detractors have long debated how real all this “reality” actually is. The consensus: Not very.

In April, when VH1 announced it was going to shift away from its tackiest shows such as “Flavor of Love,” network president Tom Calderone told *Mediaweek*: “As much as they’ve enjoyed the ‘Love’ franchise, our audience was getting a little fatigued by all those manufactured reality shows. They want more authenticity in their reality, which isn’t to say that it can’t be comedic and light.”⁴

Thompson says, “If we were suddenly to find out that the voting on ‘American Idol’ was a total sham, that nobody actually counts the votes, that would be a big deal. People would care about that. But if someone hears, oh, on ‘Survivor’ they reshot one of the scenes so they could get it from above, I think most people shrug their shoulders and say ‘so what?’ We’re talking about shows where guys are dating 25 women at the same time!”

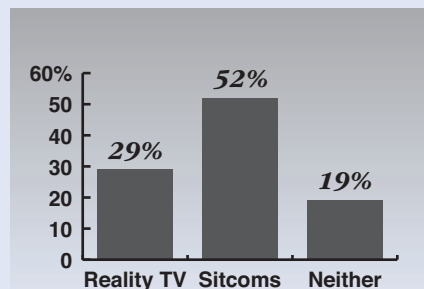
In the 1950s, a forerunner of today’s reality programming was engulfed in scandal when it was revealed that some quiz shows, including the popular “Twenty One,” were rigged. Early this year there were echoes of that scandal when Fox pulled “Our Little Genius” amid allegations that the young contestants were coached. *The New York Times* reported that the Federal Communications Commission was investigating, but there have been no reported results, and the FCC does not comment on investigations.⁵

More common are questions about degrees of fakery. All the shows are edited so there’s a story line, some more than others. Do producers put

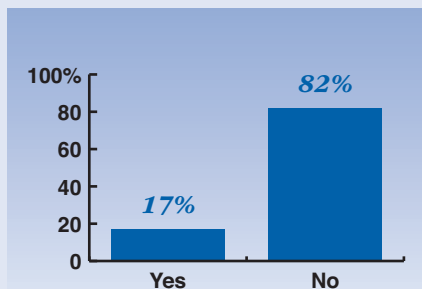
Americans Prefer Sitcoms Over Reality TV

Almost twice as many Americans prefer sitcoms to reality television (left). Less than 20 percent have actually voted in televised talent contests such as “American Idol” (right).

Do you prefer to watch reality TV or sitcoms?



Have you ever voted for a contestant in a televised talent contest such as “American Idol” or “Dancing With the Stars?”



* Figures may not total 100 due to rounding.

Sources: Marist College Institute for Public Opinion, October 2009 (left); Pew Research Center, January 2010 (right)

participants in artificial situations? Of course. Do they feed them lines? Maybe.

For several years, the Writers Guild of America has campaigned to organize the largely non-unionized shows. The union maintains that story producers, segment producers and story editors have writers’ responsibilities.

“The difference between shows like ‘Desperate Housewives’ and ‘Survivor’ is how the source material is generated. Reality writers don’t script each line for a professional actor to speak. Instead, these writers must use existing footage to work backwards from the ending in the most interesting way possible,” the union said in a 2007 report called “Harsh Reality,” based on a survey of 333 reality TV workers.⁶

“Sixty-nine percent of reality writers create storylines or outlines based on previously shot footage. Fifty-five percent create ‘paper cuts,’ which consist of written outlines for a reality TV episode. Fifty-four percent write material for a host to read or for characters to read as a voiceover,” the report said.

But such issues don’t scare away viewers. As Thompson says, “There are times when a reality TV show can be just what the doctor ordered.”

Some would even argue that reality TV can be good for you. For instance, “Extreme Makeover: Home Edition” builds houses for needy families. There has been criticism that these families are exploited for strong ratings and cheap tears, and that in some cases, they may be left in a different but still bad situation. Nonetheless, sheltering people who might otherwise be homeless is generally considered a social good.

In June, *Realscreen* editor Walsh moderated an industry panel that discussed the good reality TV can do, focusing on shows such as “Biggest Loser,” “Intervention” and “Hoarders” that aim to solve social or personal problems. “Obviously, there’s a voyeuristic element. It is television after all; by the nature of television, there’s going to be a camera, filming somebody,” he says. “I think what pro-

ducers for those have to do is negotiate a balance between the voyeuristic elements and actually putting forward a sincere and educational yet entertaining document of what this problem is and how it can be solved.”

As reality TV enters its second decade after “Survivor,” here are some of the issues being discussed:

Has reality TV caused a coarsening of society?

Americans say they really, really don't like the influence that reality television programming has had on their culture. In late 2009, the non-profit Pew Research Center interviewed 1,504 U.S. adults about their impressions of the decade that was ending, including which social and technological changes had been for the better and which for the worse.

Overwhelmingly, the respondents picked reality TV as a villain: 63 percent said it was a change for the worse, with just 8 percent saying it was a change for the better. By a large margin, it was the least-popular trend tested. The runner-up — more people getting tattoos — was considered a change for the worse by just 40 percent. (See graph, p. 680.)

A recent article that appeared on CNN's Website, headlined “In defense of reality TV,” drew almost 200 comments, most highly negative. As one commenter wrote, “Reality TV teaches the scum of our society that they actually have value when in reality their only purpose is to be organ donors and scientific experimentation on their corpses.”⁷

It's not just the anonymous masses who are concerned. “I think of how generations of kids are watching this program and are gaining permission to treat other people that way, to judge them and to say nasty things to them. I think that's a terrible thing,” renowned singer Michael Feinstein said about “American Idol” during a session with the Television Critics Association in August. He was appearing before the critics to promote a three-part PBS special about the history of American music. “To see a show where souls are dismissed wholesale in that way is a very sad and dangerous thing.”⁸

“Whether reality television is guiltier than other forms of programming,

say it's not meant to be taken all that seriously.

Andy Dehnart, a visiting assistant professor of journalism at Stetson University in Florida and editor of Reality Blurred, a Website, is one of the defenders. He maintains that the best of reality television can be “very compelling, and often better than scripted TV.”

Of course there are bad patches, he says. “I think in those disturbing moments, it's worth questioning whether the show is constructing a stereotype, which is sometimes true, or if the show is holding up a mirror to us which is sometimes saying, this is what we look like as a culture.”

He adds, “If you think back to the Jerry Springer days, I think a lot of time the criticism just comes from a level of discomfort. It's easier to sort of want to imagine that's fake or that the show is just creating that, rather than thinking about how this is the way we actually are sometimes as people.”

Rich Juzwiak, a senior editor at VH1.com, blogs about that channel's reality shows, which over the years have included some of those most often criticized as bad influences.

Where many cultural critics are quick to slam “Jersey Shore,” the drunken, screaming hit on VH1's sister channel MTV, Juzwiak is an unabashed fan. “Extreme human behavior is the point, and they have extreme human behavior coming out of their pores.”

In his blog, he's frequently catty, a reflection of the assumption that his audience is in on the joke. For instance, his headline on a recap of the first episode of “You're Cut Off” was “Your



ABC/Getty Images/Suzi Altman

Reality TV programs such as “Extreme Makeover: Home Edition” — in which volunteers build dream homes for needy families — have been praised by critics for doing social good and not dwelling on voyeuristic elements.

I don't know,” says *Realscreen* editor Walsh. All types of media have the “capability of informing and inspiring society,” he says. For instance, he says, “Deadliest Catch,” with its portrayal of the pressures and rewards of a blue-collar lifestyle, “can do a lot of good for a mass audience.”

He points out that many people believe reality television simply reflects what's going on in our society, rather than hurting us. Others

Civilization Has Been Declined.” On that summer 2010 show, after their credit cards were theatrically declined, nine rich, spoiled young women lived together in a middle-class home. They actually — gasp — had to learn to cook and clean up for themselves. These self-described princesses were walking proof that money doesn’t equal class.

“I feel professionally I can make fun of their ways, because isn’t this the point of the show?” Juzwiak asks.

The second season debut of “Jersey Shore” drew 5.3 million viewers, almost double the show’s average last year, according to MTV, and was the highest-rated cable broadcast of 2010 among those ages 12 to 34.⁹ But that number is small compared with network broadcasts; it would not have ranked near the top 10 for broadcast shows that week.¹⁰

The University of Maryland’s Gomery points out that decades ago everyone watched three or four TV networks. Now, cable is more like radio, with small audiences, a wide variety of choices and little mass effect — far different from the networks that dominated popular culture from 1949 to 1982. “That world is long gone,” he says.

Does reality TV perpetuate harmful racial, gender and other stereotypes?

It was a scene too implausible for fiction: On July 27, Snooki rang the bell to open trading on the New York Stock Exchange.

It was all part of the whirlwind of publicity surrounding the second season of “Jersey Shore,” with its beach house full of “guidos” and “guidettes.” And Nicole “Snooki” Polizzi is an important part of the business of parent company Viacom.

But not all the attention was positive. A few days later, Snooki was arrested for disorderly conduct, then released. And in a letter printed in *The Washington Post*, the president of the National Italian American Foundation lashed out at the show.

The group “has gone on record since the show’s debut condemning its depiction of a false ‘reality’ in which people make a living by disrespecting their great heritage and demeaning themselves,” Joseph V. Del Raso wrote. “We implore MTV to focus on responsible behavior and stop promoting cultural stereotypes. People are watching only in disgusted fascination.”¹¹

Of course reality programming depicts stereotypes. “And so does advertising. And so do political leaders’ statements and so do all kinds of other things. I mean, if one cares to look very hard, American culture, American popular culture in particular, is filled with, seething with, stereotypes and misogyny and all of this kind of stuff,” says Thompson, the Syracuse University professor.

“Is ‘Jersey Shore’ filled with stereotypes of certain kinds of people? Absolutely! Some of them are completely over the top, and that’s really in a lot of ways what that show is sort of about. Did ‘The Sopranos’ include stereotypes of Italian-Americans? Yes, it absolutely did. It was also one of the greatest shows ever made, but you can’t argue against the fact that yes, it had these stereotypes.” (And the Italian-American Foundation also condemned that show.)

“Are commercials a constant string of messages about beauty and body type and gender and all of that kind of stuff? Absolutely. And none of this is stop-the-presses news,” he says.

But it’s far from harmless, critic Jennifer Pozner maintains. Yes, magazine ads and 30-second TV commercials have long sold us such messages. But reality TV takes it a step further by crafting entire shows around advertiser pitches. “Those shilling narratives have been transformed into shilling reality shows that pretend to be about who we are,” says Pozner, director of Women in Media and News and author of *Reality Bites Back: The Troubling Truth About Guilty Pleasure TV*, scheduled for publication in November.

Ten years of reality programming “have been an erasure of the concept that the women’s movement, the civil rights movement . . . have ever existed,” she says. “The problem is in thinking that the entertainment options we’re being presented with are harmless fluff. They’re not.” (See “*At Issue*,” p. 693.)

There are increasing levels of product placement in scripted shows, too, but such deals — think of the judges on “American Idol” drinking Coca-Cola — are an integral part of why tight-budget reality shows work economically. “In scripted entertainment, there are some shows that are incredibly stereotypical, and some that are incredibly nuanced. There’s a range. In reality TV, they do have writers, they do have editors — but they never have nuance. There are always the same stock characters: the bitch, the slut, the douchebag, the prince charming, the angry black woman,” Pozner says.

As far as race, in the first part of the 2000s, most reality shows dealt with race by marginalization, tokenization or typecasting, she says. But a change came with VH1’s “Flavor of Love” in 2006, which showcased clownish rapper Flavor Flav as he looked for love, or something, amid a crew of outrageous would-be girlfriends. From then on, Pozner says, a whole subgenre has embraced portrayals of blacks that are “extremely focused on minstrel-era stereotypes.”

Tokenism on all fronts is troublesome, says Allendra Letsome, membership vice president of the National Organization for Women. If there are eight or nine people in a cast, she says, one will be a black man, and three will be women — “never more than half” — and perhaps a Hispanic or Asian. “You see the same thing in many scripted shows. . . . One is enough, whether it’s scripted or reality.”

The stereotyping is not necessarily malicious, others point out. “Because of the nature of television and casting, a lot of times they go for easy

'Idol' Is Most Popular Prime-Time Show

"American Idol" is the most popular reality TV show (left) as well as the most popular broadcast primetime show (right).

**Top TV Shows,
Broadcast Prime-Time,
2009-2010 Season**
(among 18-49-year-olds)

Show	Network	Average viewers (in millions)
"American Idol"	FOX	23.0
"American Idol Results Show"	FOX	22.0
"NFL National Post-Game Show"	CBS	19.5
"NCIS"	CBS	19.3
"Dancing With the Stars"	ABC	19.1
"Sunday Night Football"	NBC	18.7
"Undercover Boss"	CBS	17.8
"NFL Sunday Post-Game Show"	FOX	16.8
"NCIS: Los Angeles"	CBS	16.1
"The Mentalist"	CBS	15.4

**Top Reality TV Shows,
Broadcast Prime-Time,
2009-2010 Season**
(among 18-49-year-olds)

Show	Network	Average viewers (in millions)
"American Idol"	FOX	23.0
"American Idol Results Show"	FOX	22.0
"Dancing With the Stars"	ABC	19.1
"Undercover Boss"	CBS	17.8
"Dancing With the Stars Results Show"	ABC	14.8
"Survivor: Heroes-Villains"	CBS	12.6
"Survivor: Samoa"	CBS	12.3
"The Bachelor"	ABC	11.6
"Amazing Race 15"	CBS	11.1
"Amazing Race 16"	CBS	10.4

Source: Bill Gorman, "Final 2009-10 Broadcast Primetime Show 18-49 Ratings," *TV by the Numbers*, June 2010

categories of people so they kind of fit into expectations from audience members," says Dehnart of Reality Blurred. "Then there's also the self-selecting part of the shows, which is that if someone tries out for a TV show, they probably are watching a previous season. . . . So, if you're one very narrow type of anything, whether you're a white religious conservative girl from the South or you're an African-American male who grew up in the inner city, or any of these sort of slots that they tend to fill, you might sort of say that guy or girl is just like me,

and you apply, and you end up with the same person or same type of person over and over again."

But producers can break the cycle, he says. He cites "Survivor," notable in its early seasons for its extreme whiteness. "A couple of years ago they had their very controversial 'race war' season, which was they had four tribes, white people, Asian people, black people and Latino people, and what they did was go out and basically recruit a bunch of people."

That premise for season 13, broadcast in 2006, made many viewers cringe

and many critics criticize, but it also produced one of the few non-white winners, Yul Kwon, a Korean-American lawyer who has since gone to work for the FCC.

There are also situations where reality TV busts stereotypes. "It has the ability to introduce us to people who we wouldn't have met otherwise," Dehnart says.

An oft-cited example is the third season of "The Real World," set in San Francisco and shown in 1994. Pedro Zamora, an HIV-positive gay man, grabbed the show's spotlight and educated its young viewers about what it was like to live with AIDS. Zamora died shortly after the series aired.

Activists continue to praise MTV's depiction of gay people. In July, the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation rated MTV "excellent" on its Network Responsibility Index, the first time such a high rating had been awarded. "From their inception, MTV programs like 'The Real World' and 'America's Best Dance Crew' have offered richly diverse portrayals of gay and transgender people that help Americans better understand and accept our community," GLAAD President Jarrett Barrios said.¹²

Does reality TV distort how young viewers perceive life?

Where some people see reality television as one more hazard for young people growing up today, Thompson, the popular-culture professor, sees it as a possible career path.

As he gauges what a lifetime of watching such programs has meant for his students, he says, "The biggest effect it's had is that some of them consider it now one of the options they may have if they want to become famous. I have had a lot of students who have aspired to try out for 'American Idol,' some of whom have actually done it. 'The Real World' comes to campuses for auditions on a regular basis."

As far as other “big behavioral kinds of things,” he says, “obviously, the culture we consume comes in an aggregate and helps to shape who we are. The books that we read, the movies that we watch and all the rest of it accrues and adds up together to shape the contents of our minds.” But if a kid watches a stunt on “Jackass” and imitates it, “and it gets reported all over the news, and it essentially says reality TV is killing a generation of our kids? I think that is really, really overstated.

“Most of my students that I talk to about reality TV watch it very much in the same mode that I as a 50-year-old adult do, which is oftentimes very much tongue in cheek.”

Melissa Henson, director of communications and public education for the Parents Television Council, an advocacy group that frequently criticizes TV vulgarity, separates reality programming into two categories. A lot of it can be family-friendly, she says — for instance, ‘American Idol’ or ‘Extreme Makeover: Home Edition.’

“And then there’s everything else.”

She says, “What we have found is that they do contain higher levels of profanity and foul language. They also tend to include more aggression.”

While not much research has been done specifically on how reality TV affects children, Henson says it’s possible to extrapolate from generalized research on how media affects behavior. “And what the vast body of research indicates is that kids who are exposed to



Take a group of attractive, racially diverse twenty-somethings, put them up for a year in a nice house and then watch the fun. That’s the successful formula for MTV’s “The Real World” — which debuted in 1992 and set the stage for similar encounters among strangers in shows such as “Survivor.” The popular series has just completed its 24th season in New Orleans with the cast members above. MTV has picked up the show for at least four more seasons.

MTV

higher levels of violence tend to behave more violently,” she says. “Kids who are exposed to higher levels of sex in media tend to become sexually active earlier in life than peers with less exposure.

“Because kids are seeing people close to their own age behaving a certain way on these reality programs, they tend to accept that that’s normative behavior.”

Unlike scripted television — think, for instance, of cop shows like the popular “CSI” — most reality programs stop short of portraying physical violence. Instead, they contain a lot of what academics call relational aggression. “Such behavior involves direct harm to relationships or the social environment and includes gossiping, spreading rumors, social exclusion and relational manipu-

lation,” a group of researchers wrote recently in the *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media*. They also found that reality shows contain much higher levels of verbal aggression — insults, name calling — than scripted shows.¹³

The researchers evaluated and compared a selection of scripted and unscripted shows, counting not only the frequency of various types of aggression but also whether it was justified or rewarded. “Such aggression often helps the contestant to ‘get ahead’ in the program, for example, by defaming another contestant’s reputation or by turning contestants against each other,” they wrote. “However, the extremely high levels of relational aggression in reality programs are somewhat alarming, given the realistic portrayal of the aggression.”

How does that affect young people? Lead researcher Sarah M. Coyne cau-

tioned in an e-mail interview that she hadn’t personally studied the long-term effects of reality viewing. “However, watching a heavy diet of aggression (which reality TV is high on) can have a long-term effect on both aggressive attitudes and behavior,” commented Coyne, an assistant professor at the School of Family Life at Brigham Young University.

Others caution that reality shows can provide warped role models. “On reality TV, they can get away with a little more distortion than a scripted television show would,” says Letsome, the NOW vice president. “There’s glamorization of drunkenness and casual sex. It reinforces the most immature actions of our entire society.”

When high-school students in particular see such behavior held out on

television as the norm, it distorts their perceptions of what's acceptable. "It sends a message to the next generation that this is what I have to do, this is what is expected of me when I get to college or get to the business world," she says.

Among college students, though, the effects of reality television are less than pessimists fear, says Gomery, who teaches history of media at the University of Maryland. Sure, students follow "American Idol," but they care more about social media. "Reality TV is an adult form," he says. "College students are much more interested in other things. . . . If you want large audiences, you can't rely on college students. Reality TV really works because it's one of the few genres that people born between 1945 and 1963, the Baby Boomers, like. You can't get those kinds of numbers without them." ■

BACKGROUND

In the Beginning

Almost as soon as there was TV, there was reality TV. After World War II, popular radio entertainers moved to the budding television networks — in 1948, "Arthur Godfrey and His Friends" debuted on the new medium, as did Ted Mack and his "Original Amateur Hour" and Allen Funt, longtime host of "Candid Microphone," whose "Candid Camera" appeared on ABC.¹⁴



"Ted Mack's *Original Amateur Hour*" was among the first reality television shows in the postwar 1940s. It debuted in 1948 along with Allen Funt's "Candid Camera," which successfully transitioned from "Candid Microphone" on radio.

Time Life Pictures/Getty Images/Cornell Capa

The show caught real people on camera, with their real reactions to absurd situations. Its signature line became a cultural staple: "Smile! You're on Candid Camera!"

"We've always had reality television, always," says Berman of *Mediaweek*.

Would-be stars sang in hope of fame on shows such as "Original Amateur Hour" (1948-60), precursors of the hopefuls on "American Idol." Quiz shows abounded, as did silly skit shows involving audience members. On "Beat the Clock," which first aired in 1950, the challenges weren't as wacky as on, say, today's "Wipeout," but they still involved plenty of whipped cream in the face.

On "Queen for a Day," women told their hard-luck stories, and the studio audience decided by its applause which of the tear-stricken contestants was the most deserving of prizes. For instance, in 1960 Mrs. Clarice Singer received not only a special bed for her paralyzed brother but also a brand-name dinette set, tape recorder, appliances and more, each presented with a short pitch from the sponsor.¹⁵ On "Strike

It Rich," which ran in prime time from 1951-55, the desperate contestants answered quiz questions to earn enough to solve their woes, but even if they lost, they could still turn to the "Heart Line." Viewers could call in to offer these poor souls cash, merchandise or jobs.

"To some it was TV's noblest hour, helping those less fortunate than most through the charity and goodwill of viewers. To others, it was one of the most sickening spectacles ever seen on a TV screen, exploiting those same unfortunates for the vicarious thrill of

viewers and the selfish gain of advertisers," according to TV historians Tim Brooks and Earle Marsh.¹⁶

In 1973, PBS aired a reality milestone, the 12-episode "An American Family." For seven months, cameras followed the William C. Loud family of Santa Barbara, Calif. During the series, Pat and Bill Loud's marriage fell apart, and their son Lance came out as gay. The show was a hit.

This was classy public television, a cinematic documentary. But the debate over it sounded similar to what surrounds the louder, trashier shows of today. "The program has been hailed as a bold experiment in journalism and as a work of art comparable to 'The Death of a Salesman' or the birth of the novel," TV critic Tom Shales wrote in *The Washington Post*, a week before Pat would ask Bill for a divorce, in front of the world. "But praise has hardly been unanimous. Some critics, calling it pseudo-sociology, have charged that the program reveals little about American families because the wealthy Louds are so atypical. Some

Continued on p. 688

Chronology

1930s-1970s

Television becomes the dominant mass medium.

1939

Radio powerhouse RCA inaugurates the first regular TV broadcasts at the New York World's Fair. President Franklin D. Roosevelt officially opens the fair and becomes the first president to appear on television.

1941

On July 1, NBC and CBS are granted commercial licenses for their New York stations. After the Dec. 7 attack on Pearl Harbor, development of commercial TV stops.

1946

After the war, networks begin to broadcast regular series programming.

1948

TV's growing popularity attracts established radio stars. . . . Allen Funt's "Candid Microphone" becomes "Candid Camera."

1973

Public Broadcasting System shows "An American Family," a 12-part documentary about the William C. Loud family of Santa Barbara, Calif. Its focus on developing characters beyond the typical two-hour documentary is a precursor to modern reality programming.

1980s-1990s

Reality television takes on its modern shape.

1981

MTV is launched with the music video "Video Killed the Radio Star" by The Buggles.

1984

Cable Act largely deregulates the cable television industry, leading to explosive growth.

1989

"Cops" joins "America's Most Wanted" on Fox.

1990

"America's Funniest Home Videos" debuts on ABC.

1992

"The Real World" debuts on MTV. The first season puts seven young strangers together in an apartment in Manhattan's SoHo neighborhood.

1994

"Real World III," set in San Francisco, features Pedro Zamora, an HIV-positive gay man, and sparks dialogue about AIDS among housemates and viewers. Zamora died shortly after the series ran.

1999

"Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?" already a hit in the United Kingdom, is telecast on ABC as a special two-week summer event, hosted by Regis Philbin. Astoundingly successful, it returns as another special in November, then a regular series in January, sometimes running five nights a week.

2000s Reality moves from freak show to mainstay.

2000

"Who Wants to Marry a Multi-Millionaire" airs as a one-time special on Fox on February 15. . . . "Survivor" debuts on CBS May 31, becomes the year's top-rated series. "Big Brother" follows on CBS on July 5.

2001

Academy of Television Arts and Sciences adds an Emmy category for outstanding reality program. An award for outstanding reality competition follows in 2003 and one for outstanding host in 2008.

2002

"The Bachelor" debuts on ABC on March 25, becoming the most popular of many reality dating shows. . . . "American Idol," clone of a popular British talent show, debuts on Fox on June 11 and dominates ratings for the rest of the decade.

2003

"Queer Eye for the Straight Guy" premieres on Bravo in June and transforms the highbrow entertainment channel into a reality powerhouse. Other cable channels begin to enthusiastically embrace "reality."

2007-08

Strike by TV writers gives a further boost to reality shows, by now a staple of every network.

2009

MTV's tried-and-true premise of putting young strangers in a house with a hot tub heads to the "Jersey Shore." Loud, hard-drinking "guidos" and "guidettes" including "Snooki" and "The Situation" create so much pop culture buzz that they're able to hold out for big pay jumps for the second season.

2010

"Undercover Boss" debuts after the Super Bowl and becomes the season's most-watched new series. . . . Discovery Channel's "World's Deadliest Catch" depicts a family's emotional vigil surrounding the death of fishing boat captain Phil Harris. The death itself is not on screen, but the farewells are. . . . "Survivor" host Jeff Probst and British chef Jamie Oliver win Emmy awards.

Straight Talk From a Reality TV Producer

“Young, attractive people behaving badly always works for television.”

Doug DePriest jokes that as an executive at Discovery Communications he “quite possibly warped the values of an entire generation” by helping to launch the “World Poker Tour.” Now, as president and co-founder of Big Fish Entertainment, in Bethesda, Md., he produces shows for Discovery, National Geographic and other cable channels. His newest shows include “D.C. Cupcakes,” about two sisters who run a bakery in Washington, and one about a military bomb squad in Afghanistan, or what DePriest describes as “a real life ‘Hurt Locker.’”

DePriest recently discussed Reality TV with writer Maryann Haggerty; an edited transcript of his comments follows:

Evolution of Reality

Public television is the mother of all reality programs because they’re the ones that actually supported the family-based series where a crew would go live with a family for a year, and they would create a short series about it. That was completely what I call just fly-on-the-wall reality.

As cable grew, you begin to see programs that were based more on a situational reality. You would be housed in something, whether it was a police department or a fire department or whatever, but it was all based on what people did. That’s sort of what happened [with] “The World’s Deadliest Catch.” It’s reality, because you are following these people, but in essence, you are creating characters out of these people, long-running characters.

At the same time, you start seeing [shows] where things are literally being cast. They’re either cast against a format, or they’re cast against a situation. “Survivor” actually started as the “Eco-Challenge,” where you cast people who were competitive and

had great characters, but they were very serious survivalists on some level, or they were great triathletes, or something about them made you believe they could win.

Then Mark Burnett, who created that, came up with the idea of “Survivor.” That was kind of the beginning of, we’re casting characters, we’re putting them in a situation, we’re controlling and manipulating a situation.

Then, what starts to happen is people realize that if you can get characters big enough and compelling enough, you can start to hit the kind of numbers that cable networks need to have a good business. That’s probably the beginning of “Jersey Shore.” Go out and find the most outrageous “guidos” and “guidettes” and have them do something that they normally do. Then of course go out and manipulate everything you can possibly manipulate, create problems, or allow problems to fester, or keep people up so long that they can no longer function.

Outrageous Characters

You’re now finding outrageous personalities and creating television shows around them, [such as] “Dog the Bounty Hunter.”

In some form or fashion you need something that stops the remote. So reality has a celebrity, a B-level celebrity who is being put through something really, really difficult, as in the [drug] rehab shows. Even those, they seem exploitative, but in the long run that guy really is doing serious rehab.

But that’s kind of what the key is. You have to have a personality that’s larger than life. Visually different helps a lot — it’s not a surprise that Dog looks like he does, that Snooki looks like she does. The reality is that the people are real. Whether

Continued from p. 686

have said, too, that the film is inadmissible as a document because no family could live with a film crew for seven months and remain natural, oblivious to the camera. . . . The Louds themselves have joined the criticism, claiming that they were misled about the filming and that the portrait of their family is inaccurate.”¹⁷

Rise of Modern Shows

Nonetheless, cameras both hidden and omnipresent continued to follow real people. “Cops,” which trailed real police on busts in trailer parks and

on city streets, first aired on Fox in 1989. The network was already airing “America’s Most Wanted,” which showed recreations of crimes, but this new show portrayed arrests as they happened, with no host, no voiceover and no script. In 2010, season 22, it remained a mainstay of Fox’s Saturday night programming.

Over on ABC, beginning in 1990, people were turning their own cameras on family and pets to make “America’s Funniest Home Videos,” another show that continues to thrive 20 years later. And all over daytime TV, ostensibly everyday people started appearing on talk shows such as “The Jerry Springer Show,” in contrast to the traditional celebrities and show biz types.

Perhaps the biggest step in the evolution of reality TV came on cable TV. “It wasn’t until the premiere of ‘The Real World’ on MTV in 1992 that we began to witness the emergence of many of the textual characteristics that would come to define the genre’s current format,” according to the editors of a 2009 book on the history of reality TV. “By casting young adults in a manner intended to ignite conflict and dramatic narrative development, placing the cast in a house filled with cameras and microphones, and employing rapid editing techniques in an overall serial structure, the producers created a text that would prefigure programs such as ‘Survivor’ and ‘Big

there's a level of reality after that just depends on the network and the series.

All these formats are repeatable. If you find the right character and it's the right story line and it hits with the viewers for whatever reason, then it's something you can continue to do. So that makes sense for a company, because development costs are what kill television companies. You can't afford to develop 20 shows and only sell one. That one better be "American Idol," or eventually you're just going to be swallowed up.

Reality TV Today

What I look for is something in which there's already a kernel of a compelling interest. So with "D.C. Cupcakes" my feeling was — and it's just intuition — there's something very compelling about cupcakes. So the subject matter itself works. There's a story line between two sisters, that's something we all relate to. Then there's the fact that it's a business that actually creates something that people care about. The stresses of a business make for good television.

Go back to "Jersey Shore." Young, attractive people behaving badly always works for television. Throw in the fact



"The stresses of a business make for good television," says producer Doug DePriest, left, creator of "D.C. Cupcakes," about two sisters who run a bakery in Washington.

© Big Fish Entertainment

that it's also got a stereotype. I don't mean that in a negative sense, I just mean that as in recognizable. There's even kind of a fantasy about people from New Jersey who are larger than life. It's almost like being able to deliver on a caricature that America already identifies with.

It becomes less and less real all the time. The stakes are so high with a lot of these reality shows, what is real anymore?

"Snooki" and "the Situation" are negotiating \$30,000-an-episode deals to go on "Jersey Shore" and be in what is probably a fairly scripted program.

It's now about performing. If you watch a "Project Runway," it's kind of hard to believe that anybody is saying anything that's actually an original sentence. Every scene, the stakes are so high, it's all so valuable. You can't afford to have ratings slip.

I don't have any problem with this, because it's all entertainment. It's just that. I don't even think we should call reality programs reality programs. You know, I watch "Jersey Shore" with my 15-year-old, just turned 16. The kid's a straight-A student, she's got her life together. She loves "Jersey Shore." She'll just look at me and go, "I know, they're unbelievably stupid, but aren't they entertaining?"

Brother,' " they wrote. "It could also be argued that 'The Real World' trained a generation of young viewers in the language of reality TV." ¹⁸

This was not solely an American phenomenon. Indeed, the deregulation of European television in the 1990s meant more channels, with more time to fill on tight budgets. ¹⁹ Among the most successful shows in the late 1990s were the Dutch hit "Big Brother" and the Swedish smash "Expedition Robinson," the precursor to "Survivor."

The British game show "Who Wants to Be a Millionaire" also spawned a U.S. version, which became the biggest hit of the summer of 1999. As millionaire fever infected the nation,

Fox jumped in during the February 2000 sweeps period with "Who Wants to Marry a Multi-Millionaire?"

The two-hour special was condemned as trashy, crass and exploitative before it was broadcast, and from there things only got worse. Fifty women paraded before a "multimillionaire," who picked his favorite and married her on screen. "At the end of those two hours, if you turned down the volume of your TV and you listened real carefully, you could hear Western civilization crumbling around you," popular-culture professor Thompson said at the time. (He now says he was overly glib: "I don't think [the show] has damaged our culture in significant ways.")

The show scored big ratings, but the union between Rick Rockwell and Darva Conger was anything but blessed. He wasn't really a multimillionaire, and a former fiancée had obtained a restraining order against him after charging him with abusing her. The marriage was quickly annulled. It seemed all the critics agreed: Reality TV was a fiasco, an embarrassment worse than the worst predictions.

The Last Decade

But over at CBS, a network that long had embraced its Tiffany image, plans continued for two shows that would make 2000 the summer of



Discovery Communications Inc.



Getty Images/Pascal Le Segretain



ABC/Getty Images/Adam Larkey

Something for Everyone

Reality television offers shows that have broad appeal as well as programs geared to niche audiences. Discovery Channel's "Deadliest Catch" (top) portrays the real-life events on commercial fishing boats in the Bering Sea during Alaska's king crab season. E!'s "Keeping Up With the Kardashians" (middle) documents the lives of the three famous-for-being-famous sisters. ABC's "Dancing With the Stars" lets viewers select the best dancer among celebrity participants. Nicole Scherzinger — lead singer for the pop group Pussycat Dolls — won this year along with dance partner Derek Hough.

reality — the U.S. versions of "Big Brother" and "Survivor."

The Swedish predecessor of "Survivor" had been a magnet for controversy, especially because participants voted their fellow players off the island. The first contestant to be boot-ed committed suicide. Routinely, more than half of Swedish TV viewers watched each episode, a spectacular ratings success.²⁰

Prior to "Survivor's" debut on May 31, 2000, U.S. critics were prepared to be appalled. "This summer may turn all of us into Peeping Toms, yet that voyeurism may be the series' least creepy social aspect. This is also the summer when Darwin meets Orwell, with the survival of the fittest captured by ever-present cameras," culture critic Caryn James wrote in *The New York Times*.²¹ Many writers also managed to bring in William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*.

But viewers loved it. "Survivor" was the top-rated show of the 2000-2001 season. "That first summer of 'Survivor' was some of the most exciting television I had watched in a career of lots and lots and lots of television viewing," Thompson says. "Even the really trashy stuff, if it's done well . . . it can be really quite pleasurable. I think for us to look down our noses at some of this stuff is kind of disingenuous when we actually watch it and sometimes we can't wait for the next episode."

In the decade since, reality television has become a staple, rather than a curiosity. In June 2002, "American Idol" debuted, and its mix of young talent, outspoken judges and viewer voting has kept it atop the ratings season after season. Even though numbers weakened in early 2010, it was still the top-rated show in the spring.

On cable, reality has become almost the norm — it's news when a cable channel originates scripted programming, such as AMC's "Mad Men."

Continued on p. 692

Will 'American Idol' Finally Win an Emmy?

"Judges are disgusted by shows featuring trashy players like 'Jersey Shore.'"

It's not a daring prediction: blogger Robert Licuria thinks "The Amazing Race" could win another Emmy this year. Ever since the academy that gives out the coveted golden TV statuette established a category for Outstanding Reality-Competition in 2003, the CBS travel-game show has won — seven times in a row.

"I would suggest 'The Amazing Race' will win again, and my only hesitation is that voters may eventually wish to reward TV's big mammoth hit/money-maker 'American Idol,' which has never won," says Licuria, who makes awards predictions for the *Los Angeles Times* blog Gold Derby and on his own Website, Awards Heaven.

The winner in that category will be announced Aug. 29 on the "Primetime Emmy" show. The winners in two other reality TV categories were announced on Aug. 21 at the Academy of Television Arts and Science's Creative Arts presentation, which mostly concentrates on technical categories such as cinematography, casting or costumes. The winner for Outstanding Reality Program that night was "Jamie Oliver's Food Revolution," in which the popular British chef went to a West Virginia town full of overweight people and taught them to eat more sensibly.

The winner for Outstanding Reality Host was "Survivor's" Jeff Probst, who has won each year since the award was set up in 2008. (Probst himself wasn't there; after the category was bumped from the big prime-time show, he said it conflicted with his shooting schedule.) Licuria was right in his prediction for that category, made before the show. "He's going to win because he deserves it," he said.

The roster of nominees in each category is a review of what the TV industry considers the best of reality. In the Competition category, where the nominees haven't varied for years, the contenders besides "Amazing Race" and "American Idol" are "Dancing With The Stars," "Project Runway" and "Top Chef." In the plain reality category, where nominees shift more to reflect what's new each year, Chef Oliver beat "Antiques Roadshow," "Dirty Jobs," "Kathy Griffin: My Life on the D-List," "MythBusters" and "Undercover Boss."

"Generally, the reality shows that are nominated in the Reality categories are the big hits and the critical darlings. The Academy

always gravitates towards the high-brow," Licuria says. "If a show has some snob appeal or a cool factor, it is likely to be nominated until it falls out of favor. For example, back when 'Queer Eye for the Straight Guy' was the watercooler show of the moment, it won the Reality award without much trouble. Shows like 'American Idol' and 'Dancing With the Stars' are mainstays in the Reality-Competition Program category because they remain big broadcast network hits, while 'Top Chef' and 'Project

Runway' are now perennial nominees because they are hip critical darlings."

He adds, "The point is, you aren't going to see 'The Biggest Loser,' 'Jersey Shore,' 'Big Brother' or 'The Bachelor' in the running. They just aren't cool, they aren't ground-breaking, and they don't set the ratings on fire."

Even more, "Emmy voters are snobs," says Tom O'Neil, the chief awards writer for the *Los Angeles Times*. "Look at the shows that won best series the most times in recent years — 'Frasier' and 'The West Wing' in the comedy and drama races. Both snooty programs. Voters are disgusted by shows featuring trashy players like 'Jersey Shore' and 'Kardashians.'" *

But it takes more than cool to win, and that's where 'Amazing Race' has the edge, O'Neil explains. The awards voting process also gives it an advantage. "Less than 100 judges view one sample episode of each nominee. They see DVDs of sample episodes. 'Amazing Race' is a taped show comprised of slick editing. Also contestants are paired up. Part of the thrill of watching the show is to view the dynamic fights, jokes and affection between the pairs.

"'American Idol,' by contrast, is a live show featuring solo contestants. Much of its appeal is in the suspense over who'll win. Since 'Idol' is the highest-rated show on TV, that means most judges have probably seen it during its first airing. When judges view the DVDs of nominees, many of them had not previously seen 'Amazing Race.' "

— **Maryann Haggerty**



Getty Images/Kevin Winter

The call-in show "American Idol" is seeking its first Emmy win for Outstanding Reality Competition, an award established in 2003 and presented seven times in a row to CBS' "The Amazing Race."

* The judges are television professionals such as writers, directors, producers, reporters, editors and cinematographers.

Watching Reality TV With a Critical Eye

Viewers must remember, "It's not reality, it's entertainment."

Although reality television is designed to appeal to the couch potato in us, it's possible to watch even the silliest shows with a critical eye, according to media literacy advocates.

And that's important because reality TV can send powerful, negative messages, says Andrea Quijada, executive director of the Media Literacy Project, an Albuquerque, N.M., group that develops school curriculums in media literacy. "We do think reality TV is unique in its ability to reinforce dangerous stereotypes effectively," she says. "Even though many people who watch it say, 'Oh, I know it's sort of made up,' there's something about the fact that it's called reality that somehow still gives it a different sense of credibility that people aren't willing to give a sitcom or a drama."

Quijada's group says the key to media literacy is deconstructing the messages that each show carries. The organization maintains an extensive Website explaining the process, www.nmmlp.org.

For both adults and children who watch a reality TV show, it's important to understand "how we know what we know," says Cynthia Scheibe, associate professor of psychology at Ithaca College in New York and executive director of Project Look Sharp, another media literacy initiative.

"You're thinking about how it affects you, about how it may affect other people and you're evaluating it with respect to bias and perspective and point of view and credibility," she says, "and asking key questions, always, about what you're seeing.

It's those questions, being aware of who makes these programs, what's their purpose, who benefits from shows like this and who might be harmed by shows like this."



Getty Images/Jemal Countess

Reality TV shows created around outrageous personalities — such as "Dog the Bounty Hunter" — are reminders that much of reality television is geared toward entertainment and excitement, not necessarily faithful depiction of real life.

When children can discuss what producers do to get their attention, and why, then they can consciously choose whether to watch and, with guidance, what to watch, Perle advises. "Kids want to know these things; they don't like to be manipulated."

— **Maryann Haggerty**

"These reality shows are meant to be mindless entertainment, but there's a difference between that and killing your brain cells," says Liz Perle, editor in chief at Common Sense Media, a nonprofit Website that rates entertainment for age-appropriateness.

Perle outlines the following basic steps that parents in particular can take to help young people make sense of what they watch:

- Question "reality" as TV defines it — Talk to kids about how the shows are made — explain that there are editors and producers, and how that's different, for instance, from a 24-hour webcam. "It's not reality, it's entertainment. The minute a kid makes that shift, it changes their expectations."
- Discuss with children how participants on the shows behave, and how that differs from the way people should behave. "If this person acted this way in your home, what would you or your family do?"
- Talk — especially with older teens — about why networks air so many reality shows: to make money, more cheaply than with scripted shows. "Kids are very capable of understanding the business behind reality shows."

Continued from p. 690

The broadcast mix shifts from year to year. For instance, in the writers' strike years of 2007-08, reality programming got a boost. In the 2008-09 season, reality shows accounted for 28 percent of television's 199 primetime programs, according to Nielsen.²² Going into this fall's season, networks aren't premiering many new reality shows, but they aren't pulling many old ones, either.

Globally, reality has become an established form of entertainment. Global format companies, many based in Europe, "generate program ideas, sell concept rights, provide detailed production manuals, offer consultancy service, supply computer software and create graphics and set designs to aid licensors in localizing formats," according to DePaul University communications professor John McMurria.²³

He cited a study that estimated the global format business was worth \$2.4 billion in 2004, and growing. While developed countries such as Japan produce their own often outrageous concepts, networks in many smaller economies rely on franchised formats to fill the air.

Cultural elites around the world condemn reality programming, McMurria

Continued on p. 694

At Issue:

Can't we just sit back and enjoy reality TV?



ANNA DAVID
CULTURAL COMMENTATOR AND EDITOR OF REALITY MATTERS (HARPERCOLLINS, 2010), A COLLECTION OF ESSAYS ABOUT REALITY TV; WWW.ANNADAVID.COM

i've heard all the criticism about reality television. The way it's eating away at our intellects, tarnishing our souls and destroying our minds. The fact that it glamorizes ordinary — or, increasingly, horrible — people and hands them high-profile media careers that they in no way deserve. The way it's cheap and vulgar and takes away programming hours that could be given to culturally positive new shows. And I'm not saying the opposite — that reality television is all good. I'm merely pointing out that it isn't all bad.

Consider the (often unspoken) reason many reality TV fans tune in: to compare our lives to the ones we see televised. And here's what most of us come to realize: We don't have as many dramas and aren't living as large, especially if we watch Bravo.

And yet, we can't help but notice if we watch enough, we seem to be happier than these people. Not all of us and not all the time, but if we note the material blessings they have and then consider what we can determine about their mental health, we can't help but see that having "it all" does not happiness make. Could there be a more important message to be taking in and passing along to our children?

I also believe we can learn about ourselves from what form of reality television we watch. Idealists who want to believe that lives truly can change overnight, that a teenager can go from working the Burger King drive-thru one day to fulfilling her lifelong dream of becoming an international pop star the next, gravitate toward "American Idol." People who like the idea that order can be restored to our often chaotic lives tune into "Nanny 911" and "The Dog Whisperer." Those who want to be reminded of why it's not a good idea to drink excessively every night — or to showcase your not-fully-formed personality to the public in your twenties — watch "The Real World." The list goes on. I have to believe this form of self-analysis is at least as effective as a Rorschach test.

Finally, reality TV shows us that the world isn't quite as overwhelming as it can sometimes feel. Part of the thrill of this form of entertainment is that the people we're watching look more like us than the air-brushed celebrities we're used to seeing in our magazines or on our TV screens — they, in fact, could be us. We feel like we know them, in much the same way that Facebook makes us feel like we can know everyone. The universe thus feels a little smaller and perhaps a bit safer.

Besides, we work hard. Don't we deserve to turn our brains on autopilot and relax a bit with something that doesn't require a lot of brain power — at least every now and then?



JENNIFER L. POZNER
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, WOMEN IN MEDIA & NEWS, AUTHOR, REALITY BITES BACK: THE TROUBLING TRUTH ABOUT GUILTY PLEASURE TV, TO BE PUBLISHED IN OCTOBER.

what does it mean to be an American in the 21st century? According to reality television, women are catty bitches, stupid bimbos and greedy gold diggers whose worth can only be measured by their physical measurements.

Straight, single gals are pathetic losers and, we're led to believe, it's hilarious when they get mocked, dumped or punched in the face. Black and Latina women are violent, "low class" and "ghetto," while men of color are buffoons, thugs and criminals. And even during the worst financial crisis since the Depression, it's "important" to blow a year's salary on bridal gowns, couture clothes and luxury vacations.

And it's all happening in the name of "reality."

Nearly every night on every major network, "unscripted" (but carefully crafted) dating, makeover, lifestyle and competition shows glorify and revive regressive stereotypes most of us assume died 50 years ago.

This isn't accidental. Take it from Fox alternative entertainment president Mike Darnell, who brought us such classy concoctions as "Who Wants to Marry a Multi-Millionaire?" "Joe Millionaire" and "Temptation Island." The secret to his ratings success, he once told *Entertainment Weekly*, is that he makes sure his series are "steeped in some social belief."

Throughout the decade, this influential form of media has erased all signs that the women's rights and civil rights movements ever happened. Reality TV's masterminds have accomplished what the most ardent fundamentalists could never achieve: They've created a world in which women not only have no real choices . . . they don't even want any.

Reality shows can be fun, compelling and cathartic. And after a long, stressful day, it can be comforting to zone out with mindless entertainment. But it's just that instinct we have to resist. Advertisers and media producers want us to watch their offerings passively, to turn our brains off and let their messages wash over us uncritically. Product placement sponsors collaborate with producers to determine who will be cast, how they'll be edited, how stories will unfold, and what messages will be sent about gender, race, class, sexuality, beauty, and violence, all in an attempt to get us to think less and buy more.

We do ourselves a disservice by watching reality TV with our intellects on pause. We can enjoy the catharsis and fantasy these shows offer, but unless we engage our critical filters, we leave ourselves open to serious commercial and ideological manipulation.

Continued from p. 692

wrote, including, “those who pleaded for viewers and politicians to ‘ignore the antics of those TV idiots’ on ‘U.K. Celebrity Big Brother,’ the Chinese Communist Party that rolled back ‘vulgar’ talent contests, U.S. academics who defended the boundaries between entertainment reality TV and serious news, or Indonesian politicians who dismissed popular supernatural reality TV.”

Yet people watch. Thus, while Americans debate what “American Idol” and the rest of reality programming says about their nation’s culture, the rest of the world votes for its own favorite singers, as it has since “Pop Idol” first aired on British television in 2001. According to Fremantle, the company that controls the Idol franchise, “Since then, the format has aired 137 series across 43 territories, with a proven track record of success in every country where it has been aired.”²⁴ ■

CURRENT SITUATION

Going Too Far?

In some countries, such as China, government censors are stomping down on reality shows that don’t follow the party line.²⁵ But in the United States, the First Amendment means that you can’t censor or ban television concepts, and that the government’s right to control content is limited. But how about those circumstances where reality shows seem to enable horrendous behavior, or even foster crime? Is there anything we can or should do?

Generally, those issues are worked out within the existing legal system, and the solutions have been highly specific to each incident. For instance,

Tareq and Michael Salahi, now appearing in the Bravo series “Real Housewives of D.C.,” came to public attention by allegedly crashing a White House state dinner in late 2009; federal and Virginia prosecutors are still weighing whether to charge them. In Detroit, where a police raid accompanied by reality cameras resulted in the death of a little girl, it is the child’s family, not the government, that has sued.

With the increasing popularity of shows that examine the treatment of mental problems, such as “Hoarders,” questions arise about the propriety of presenting troubled people on air. For psychologists, it’s a hot ethical issue, says Nancy McGarrah, an Atlanta psychologist who has been active in these discussions.

Ethically, psychologists should not make diagnoses unless they have personally evaluated a patient. If they have evaluated someone, then they have an obligation to respect patient confidentiality. A psychologist may discuss a case, but only with the subject’s informed consent. The problem, she says, is that a troubled person may not be in a position to give truly informed consent. “I feel very uncomfortable on some of those shows watching someone disintegrate on camera,” she says.

Appearing on TV can be very appealing — McGarrah has been on numerous news shows herself, she says. TV provides mental health professionals with a valuable platform for educating the public. But psychologists should always keep patient welfare in mind. “That’s not an actor playing a part. This is a real person,” she says.

One problem with asking whether reality shows go too far is that the definition of “too far” differs depending on who’s watching and who’s asking. “Some families are horrified by the talk of the judges on ‘American Idol,’ and some love it,” says Liz Perle, co-founder and editor in chief at Com-

mon Sense Media, a nonprofit group that reviews and rates media for age-appropriate content.

She argues that government does indeed have a role in protecting children, “not just from inappropriate content but also from targeted marketing,” especially on broadcast TV. “As long as the public owns the airwaves, and we do, there is a role.” She and other advocates maintain that children are especially susceptible to subtle commercial pitches because they are still honing critical skills.

But the exact nature of that regulatory role remains uncertain. For instance, the FCC has no authority over cable television. “Should cable be regulated?” Perle asks rhetorically. “They’ve gotten a free pass so far. These are tough questions.”

Legal, Regulatory Action

State and federal laws and/or regulations that could affect TV are being considered in these broad areas:

- **Child labor:** One of the hottest discussions about reining in reality television is taking place not in Los Angeles or Washington but in Harrisburg, Pa., where legislators this fall likely will take up the issue of child labor laws.

Pennsylvania is home to the Gosselin family, the large brood featured on TLC’s “Jon and Kate Plus Eight” and its successor “Kate Plus Eight.” Jon and Kate are father and mother, now divorced, with eight kids, in the form of a pair of twins and a set of sextuplets.

Republican state Rep. Tom Murt has repeatedly questioned whether the children are working legally and has pushed to change the state’s child labor laws. Show executives say they’ve complied with the law, and state labor department officials have defended the legality of work permits issued.

Murt says his interest began with a panel discussion by former child actors who outlined working conditions and

the problems they faced later in life. "It was almost painful to watch," he says.

Murt contacted one of those actors, Paul Petersen, who was a Mouseketeer and for many years played Jeff Stone on "The Donna Reed Show." Now he runs A Minor Consideration, a child actor advocacy group. Petersen points out that child actors are specifically exempted from federal labor laws. That means rules are set at the state level. California has long had the strictest rules, with limits on working hours, requirements for on-set teachers, and requirements that children be paid separately from their parents and that some of their pay be held in trust.

He also points out that reality television shows tend to shoot in the states with the laxest laws. For instance, the 2007 show "Kid Nation" was set in New Mexico, which had few rules. It caused a storm because 40 children went largely unsupervised for 40 days, except for production crews. Many states don't regard appearing on reality TV as work, even if children are on camera most of the day. Producers say the kids aren't working; they're simply being filmed as they go about their life. "Over 200 kids are currently 'not employed' on reality shows across the country," Petersen says.

But any actor knows that whenever cameras are on, it's work, he says. "Reality shows are misnamed," he says. "They are commercial productions in every sense of the word."

Murt says, "We really were not seeking a confrontation with reality TV or any particular TV program." But Kate Gosselin's brother told him that the Gosselin children were being filmed during private moments, including toilet training. "They had a fake Christmas in the middle of July just to get the kids on film," Murt says. "There were concerns about the welfare of the children."



Jon and Kate Gosselin, who were raising their eight children onscreen in TLC's "Jon and Kate Plus Eight," ended up in a messy divorce that played out in the tabloids. The show continues as "Kate Plus Eight" amid concerns that the show may be flouting child-labor laws.

Getty Images for Discovery/Amy Sussman

But shouldn't the state trust parents to know what's right for their own children? Petersen, the Hollywood veteran, laughs and quotes one of his fellow former Mouseketeers: "Just seeing a kid in show business tells you all you need to know about the parents."

• **Indecency:** A federal appeals court on July 13 struck down part of the FCC policy on indecency, saying it was unconstitutional. The ruling on so-called "fleeting expletives" came in a case known as *Fox v. FCC*, which involved instances of cursing on a variety of TV shows on several networks. It's highly likely the case will go to the U.S. Supreme Court, which could decide to address how the FCC regulates indecency.

The appeals court called the policy as it's now applied unconstitutionally vague. Currently, the FCC can restrict indecent material on broadcast TV or radio between 6 a.m. and 10 p.m., when it's considered most likely that children will be watching. (Obscenity can't be broadcast at any time; there's a three-pronged legal test for what's obscene.²⁶) However, the commission has no authority over cable TV, or over broadcasters outside those hours.

What effect a change in the indecency policy could have on reality television is unclear. Over the years, there have been a few complaints about indecency on network reality shows — for instance, in 2008 the Parents Television Council filed a complaint about a brief glimpse of a male sexual organ on "Survivor." CBS responded

that the image was both fleeting and inadvertent.

For the most part, though, the broadcast networks edit their shows to conform to the existing policy, with liberal use of pixelation and blurring. On cable, just about anything short of obscenity goes.

• **Embedded advertising:** There's no need to wait for the commercials. Watch any episode of "The Biggest Loser" and you'll hear mention after mention of brand-name products the contestants use to lose weight. There's little doubt what brands of appliances are installed on "Extreme Makeover: Home Edition," or what kinds of make-up are used on "America's Next Top Model" or "Project Runway."

Even more than scripted television, reality TV embraces product placement embedded in the show. According to Nielsen, the media tracking company, eight of the 10 top shows by number of product placements in 2009 were reality. (And that's because everyone accepts WWE wrestling as scripted.) These placements, also known as embedded advertising, are a key part of the business model. They're likely to become more prevalent, not less, as television adapts to the ad-zapping reality of Tivo and other digital video recorders.

In July 2008, the FCC opened an inquiry into possible regulatory approaches to embedded advertising, collecting more than 200 comments. Entertainment and advertising industry representatives argued that current practices aren't deceptive. Numerous child advocacy groups argued for increased rules, including simultaneous ticker-style notifications of paid placements that would run along the bottom of broadcasts.

The FCC has not taken any further public action. A commission spokeswoman would not comment on the status of the inquiry. ■

OUTLOOK

Technology and Creativity

As with the rest of American television, the outlook for reality programming depends both on technological changes and creative leaps.

But the biggest questions right now revolve around one man, Simon Cowell, who has stepped down as host of "American Idol." The acerbic Brit is the highest-paid person on television, according to *The Hollywood Reporter*, which ranked him No. 1 on its Reality Power list in both 2009 and 2010.²⁷

What will happen to "Idol" without him? And can Cowell replicate his success with his new talent-search show, "X Factor," which has been a hit overseas and is set to debut in the United States in 2011? As they used to say on TV, stay tuned.

On the technology front, the transition to high-definition television is well under way. That means the scenery shots on "Survivor" are even prettier than they used to be. But "Big Brother" is still shot the old-fashioned way, which provides a bit of camouflage for people who aren't looking their best around the clock. High-definition (HD) TV is notoriously unforgiving about blemishes, wrinkles and the like.

The growth of HD means, "you have to be careful choosing people," said Phillip Swann, president of TVpredictions.com, a Website that tracks TV technology. For instance, he says, pro-

ducers might think twice before casting the famously plastic-surgeried Joan Rivers in another season of "Celebrity Apprentice."

He adds, "If you're doing "Jersey Shore," you don't go out and get the pimpest kid on the block."

The success of the movie "Avatar" in 2009 increased interest in 3-D on the big screen and on television. There are 3-D televisions on the market, but not many have sold, and there's not much programming. Swann doesn't foresee knives flying out of the hands of Top Chefs and toward viewers anytime soon. "3-D is in its infancy now and may never get out of the crib," he says.

But some programming could embrace it, predicts Walsh of Realscreen. Discovery Communications, Sony and IMAX have teamed up to develop an all-3-D channel, the companies announced in January. There's no launch date set. But Walsh points out that many of the company's channels have programs "tailor made" for 3D. "Animal Planet could certainly have fun," he says.

Television, like the rest of the established media industry, continues to speculate and experiment with computer-related technologies. How will Facebook, blogs, Twitter and other social media affect programming? Will the Internet and television converge in ways yet unknown? If an increasing number of people, particularly young people, watch entertainment on the Internet via streaming video, how does that affect the economics of broadcast and cable?

Reality TV has been at the vanguard of interactivity. Viewer voting is an essential part of "Big Brother," "American Idol" and others. A recent *New York Times* article detailed the many ways that Bravo uses social media to fine-tune its reality shows.²⁸

As far as the future, reality TV "is never going to go away," *Mediaweek* analyst Berman says. "It's not new, it's a staple and it's very valuable."

About the Author

Maryann Haggerty is a freelance journalist in Washington, D.C. For more than two decades she was a business and real estate reporter and editor for *The Washington Post*. She holds a bachelor's degree from George Washington University and has watched every episode of "Survivor."



Don't expect reality programming to become high-toned, says Andrea Quijada, executive director of the Media Literacy Project. "I feel like the volume has just been slowly turned up. Every time a new show comes out, they're testing new boundaries or in some way they're getting a little bit more offensive. I'm not seeing that changing right now."

Juzwiak, the VH1 blogger, says, "We are only becoming more fascinated with ourselves as a culture. It's a kind of cultural narcissism that we have. Human interaction and human behavior fascinate us. So, as long as we can have that, and the people look a little bit different, the scenarios are slightly different, I think I cannot see us running out of fascination." ■

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FOR MORE INFORMATION

For all practical purposes, all television channels have their own Websites, as do all reality shows. Many also have numerous fan Websites, which shift depending on the popularity of the show. Gossip about reality TV shows dominates such general entertainment sites as tmz.com. There are recaps aplenty on TV criticism sites such as televisionwithoutpity.com. And there are also sites that blend news, gossip and recaps, such as realityblurred.com. Here are nonprofit groups that cast an outsider's eye on these shows:

Common Sense Media, 650 Townsend, Suite 375, San Francisco, CA 94103; (415) 863-0600; www.common sense media.org. Provides information and educational materials about the media for children and families.

National Association for Media Literacy Education, www.name.net. Dedicated to advancing media literacy education among students, teachers, scholars and community activists.

Media Literacy Project, 6400 Wyoming Blvd., N.E., Albuquerque, NM 87109; (505) 828-3129; www.nmmlp.org (soon to move to www.medialiteracyproject.org) Cultivates critical thinking and activism and committed to "building a healthy world through media justice."

Parents Television Council, 707 Wilshire Blvd., Suite 2075, Los Angeles, CA 90017; (213) 403-1300 or toll-free (800) 882-6868; www.parentstv.org. Seeks to "promote and restore responsibility and decency to the entertainment industry in answer to America's demand for positive, family-oriented television programming."

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The Next Step:

Additional Articles from Current Periodicals

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CITING CQ RESEARCHER

Sample formats for citing these reports in a bibliography include the ones listed below. Preferred styles and formats vary, so please check with your instructor or professor.

MLA STYLE

Jost, Kenneth. "Rethinking the Death Penalty." *CQ Researcher* 16 Nov. 2001: 945-68.

APA STYLE

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