

“TV Companies Love Misery”

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On October 25, 2001, Leanne Potts of the *Albuquerque Journal* pronounced reality TV dead, and reported in her autopsy that the “cause of death, say network executives, was poor ratings apparently caused by the excess of genuine reality that viewers have been subjected to since Sept. 11.” One of those network executives, ABC Entertainment Television co-chairman Lloyd Braun, predicted in late September 2001, “I’m not so sure the country will be as accepting of these shows as they’ve been in the past.”

Fast-forward ahead a year. *Survivor: Thailand* currently sits in the top ten of the Nielsen ratings for broadcast shows, the *Real World XII* (yes, twelve) rests at number three in the ratings for cable shows, and the season finale of *The Bachelor* drew an average of 26 million viewers to ABC, a number that surely sends a shiver of excitement up Lloyd Braun’s spine.

So why has the reality show genre stayed so prominent? Why have networks scheduled such a heavy roster of reality shows, why do viewers enjoy watching them, and why are people so willing to appear in them?

The answer to the first question is a no-brainer. Reality shows are cheap to produce, relative to the typical drama or sitcom. There are no stars or writers to pay, and while the show may award a million dollar prize at the end, that’s small potatoes in an industry where each *Friends* star gets about \$1 million per episode. Further, reality shows are a good way to brand a network in an age of channel clutter: E! is the *Anna Nicole* network, TLC is the *Trading Spaces* network, and CBS is the *Survivor* network. Finally, and most essentially, reality shows are all over the TV grid because most of them do well in the ratings.

This factor then raises the second question: why do people watch reality shows? First, these shows hinge on the most basic of spectatorial desires: we want to know what happens next. Who will get voted off, which roommate will cause the most dysfunction, what zany thing will Ozzy do tonight? While cloaked in the rhetoric of reality, these shows’ situations are obviously contrived and constructed so as to draw out the most provocative narratives possible, and no matter the genre, television viewers are attracted to clear, compelling stories. Reality shows are the prototypical TV pap: they can be fun to watch, and they don’t require much thinking to follow along.

Because of the “real” people depicted, this genre also has a special voyeuristic appeal not necessarily found in scripted genres. There is a definite guilty pleasure in judging others and watching them get judged (see *American Idol*), observing how a family deals with anachronistic living conditions (see *Frontier House*) or reveling in the horrors of others’ bad dates (see countless dating shows). In a sense, reality shows are mentally participatory; we imagine what we would do in these situations, and then pass judgment on what they did from the comfort of our couches and at the proverbial water cooler the next day.

An especially intriguing factor here is that so many of the reality shows depict people in situations of utter misery, whether performing grotesque stunts, associating with others they

detest, or being Anna Nicole Smith. Viewers apparently get a perverse thrill from watching the suffering of others, perhaps to reinforce a sense of contentment or superiority in their own lives.

But this leads to the most perplexing question of all, then: why are people willing to appear on reality shows and have their miseries televised? The answer would seem to be an obsession with celebrity. While few will win an actual prize for participating in these shows (only one gets the million dollars, and only one gets to marry Aaron), they are at least on TV. While some hope to use this as a springboard to entertainment careers, others are simply content with the phantom thrills of fame. Maybe they had to eat a bucket of worms, but 16 million people tuned in to watch them eat those worms, and how many of us can say we've had that kind of attention? Many of us, of course, would scream out, "Not me, and thank God for it!" but for others there is pleasure in those 15 minutes of fame, no matter what it took to receive them.

While we tend to think of the reality genre and its aesthetic of misery as a new phenomenon, we can look back to fifties television and see *Queen for a Day*, where despondent housewives told true tales of extreme woe – "I just lost my husband and my boy is in an iron lung, and all I want in the world is a new dishwasher" – and whoever the audience deemed to have the most pathetic story, as measured by an applause meter, would receive their wish plus a whole raft of other consumer goods. One of the cruelest shows in television history, *Queen for a Day* ran for eight seasons.

And this ultimately indicates that, to cite what has now become a cliché, we really have not changed much as a society since 9/11, or even since the fifties. We still enjoy watching the structured parade of misery and conflict, and people are still willing to be the object of that gaze, so without question television executives will keep sending it into our living rooms.

Christine Becker is an assistant professor in the Department of Film, Television, and Theatre at Notre Dame. Her teaching and research interests include film and TV history and the industrial operations of media industries. She has never seen an episode of *The Bachelor*, but frequently gets hooked on *Real World* marathons.