

Reality Television: Understanding the Genre and Viewer Motivations and Effects

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Abstract

This paper examines the appeal behind and the potential effects of the recent phenomenal growth in reality television programming. As part of a review of the limited scholarly research but substantial popular commentary about these programs, a specific definition that captures the core characteristics of the genre is presented, the key characteristics of 130 current programs are reported, and the results of an exploratory online survey regarding the reasons people watch these programs and the effects of this viewing is presented.

Reality Television: Understanding the Genre and Viewer Motivations and Effects

”What new could be said about reality shows? Well, with programs like 'American Idol,' 'The Bachelor,' and 'Joe Millionaire' dominating the airwaves and receiving high TV ratings, the demand for these shows is apparent. But the important question is, why?” (Hudson, 2003)

Over 10 million people watched the season premier of the fourth installment of ABC’s *The Bachelor/Bachelorette* franchise (<http://www.chron.com/cs/CDA/story.htm/ae/tv/1858168>). FOX’s *Joe Millionaire* finale in spring 2003 drew 40 million viewers and 40% of adults 18-49 watching television at the time (*Local & National Audiences*, 2003). “Reality television” has exploded as a genre and has dominated television’s recent landscape. The appeal to the broadcasters is clear: big ratings and low production costs. But Hudson asks a million(s)-dollar question: Why are so many Americans watching reality television? Further, the popularity of these programs with audiences led to over 25 new reality programs being set to debut in the fall 2003 television schedule, so the effect the audience has on the reality genre is obvious; but the genre’s effect on the viewing public is not so clear. Characterizing this genre and exploring why America is watching these programs and the effects they may have on their viewing audience are the focus of this research paper.

Why study reality television?

Aside from using information about what draws people to these programs to design new successful programs in the genre, understanding the new reality television genre and its appeal and effects can help us understand our ourselves and our culture in a post-9/11 era.

Since the 2001 attacks, reality television's grip on society has escalated. In an October 2001 article, columnist Kerry Alaric Cheeseboro wrote, "[I]n the wake of a nation's people and businesses reprioritizing, we were privy to two weeks where the network and cable Fall TV Schedule went from sudden meaningless excess to urgently described therapy." Given the 'unimaginable' and 'unreal' nature of the events, is reality television filling a need for a more familiar, unscripted, but safe, reality'?

A polarity seems to exist in the public's reaction to reality TV. Some watch their favorite series religiously and favor the unscripted qualities that the genre typically features, while others despise the genre for its perceived exploitative, crude, and sometimes over-the-top content. What does this say about our culture and where its headed? Is reality television a harmless and even helpful diversion or as the latter group fear, as these shows continue to dominate television (and they show few signs of abating), will the negative qualities that accompany the genre begin to infiltrate society to the point where it becomes increasingly desensitized and without morals, further depreciating our traditional sense of values, and simultaneously eroding our intelligence?

This paper begins to explore the answers to these important questions.

Defining reality television

Many have tried to define reality television as a genre. Media journalists and opinion columnists alike have attempted to place a label on what reality television is, yet most have come short of a sufficient definition. The problem with these definitions is that many are limited in scope and inherently omit crucial aspects of the genre. For instance, some focus primarily on the cast of the programs (e.g., "It's a TV evolution genre of a new, quasi-improvisational form of entertainment with no professional actors" ([CITATION]) and "Instead of using professional actors, reality shows cast nonprofessional actors-generally good-looking people who aspire to a

show-business career.” ([CITATION])). One writer went so far as to describe the genre as “relatively inexpensive talent shows” ([CITATION]).

A more elaborate classification comes from the Academy of Television Arts and Sciences. The Academy recently revamped its award rules ([CITATION]) in response to the reality TV explosion:

Nonfiction series (traditional). These are generally nature, history, biography and other documentary-style series such as *Behind the Music*, *E! True Hollywood Story* and *Inside the Actors’ Studio*.

Nonfiction special (traditional). Similar as above, but these are one-time-only entries such as *Scottsboro; An American Tragedy* and the various Sept, 11 tribute specials.

Nonfiction program (alternative/unscripted). These are staged and elaborately stylized reality-style sows without a game element, such as *The Real World*, *The Osbourne*, *Cops*, *Trading Spaces*, *Taxicab Confessions* and *Blind Date*. This category was formerly known as “nonfiction programming (reality).”

Reality/competition programs. These are specials or series that include a game, competition or some sort of contest with a prize attached. Programs eligible include *Joe Millionaire*, *The Bachelor*, *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire*, *The Mole*, *Road Rules* and *Ellmi Date*. This is the category that used to be called “nonfiction programming (special class).”

All of these definitions fail to encompass the entire genre. While many programs have been identified with the general label of ‘reality television,’ this paper will focus on a defined subclass of what has been deemed reality television. Given the diversity of programs currently labeled as ‘reality’ programs, a useful definition should capture the core characteristics of the

genre. For research purposes, the reality television genre therefore is defined here as “programs that feature non-professionals involved in semi-scripted dramatic situations in which the audience has a voyeuristic or participatory experience.”

Research on reality television

Although much has been written by media observers and commentators, there is very little scholarly literature on reality television. Much of this work contains analyses with respect to social theory. For example, Wong (2001) critiques others who attempt to link reality television, and specifically the program *Big Brother*, to Foucault’s analysis of surveillance in the form of the panopticon (a prison design that allows the keepers to observe all prisoners), and the exercise of centralized domination and power in society. On the other hand, Andrejevic (2002) notes that programs like *Big Brother* may presage a participatory media world and economy that empowers consumers and viewers.

The scholarly literature leaves several fundamental questions to be addressed, in particular why individuals are tuning into reality television and what effect this viewing may have on them.

Why people watch reality television

Commentators and critics have proposed several theories to explain the appeal of reality television.

In today’s violent world atmosphere, with images of terrorism and war on everyone’s television and in their thoughts, the vapidness of reality television may be a welcome distraction. "Americans are using ‘reality’(television) to escape from reality" (Shales, 2003, p. 27). While facing a weak economy, a nation at war and bleak prospects on the homeland front, Americans are happy to visit a carefree place where the most important problem is who is getting kicked off

of *Survivor* tonight or which woman *Joe Millionaire* will choose. Indeed, reality television may be the best "Weapon of Mass Distraction" that we have (Conlin, 2003)

Along with the distraction comes fascination. These shows are unscripted, allowing the viewers the satisfaction of watching events unfold and not knowing what may occur. This unrehearsed action gives drama to television that some argue has been lacking. The 2002-2003 and now the 2003-2004 seasons are said to be short on well written, dramatic plot lines, and instead have focused on formulaic cop shows. A related problem with these other programs is that little or no insight is allowed into the characters. "By the time *Survivor* ends, you know its players better than you know *Law & Order's* Detective Briscoe after eleven years" (Poniewozik, 2003, p. 65).

Not only can viewers know the inhabitants of the "reality" world well, they can enjoy getting to know the nuances of the characters due to the deep rooted voyeuristic trait everyone carries. Everyone is said to have a little bit of a peeping tom within them, and reality television allows viewers to satisfy their craving without societal repercussion; "(reality television is) satiating the need for sanitized gossip, Peeping Tomism" (Conlin, 2003). No need to peer through the curtains- merely flip on the set and get to know your virtual neighbors, with the events edited down to just the dramatic highlights.

We also may be fascinated with the people on these shows for another basic reason-we could be them. They are purportedly average Mary's and Joe's, 'real' just like you and I, allowing viewers the opportunity to identify with their trials and tribulations, losses and gains.

In addition to all this, some critics suggest that reality television satisfies a base human desire to watch others be humiliated, and in turn, boost our own self esteem; Conlin (2003) calls it "the pathetic desire to feel superior" (Conlin, 2003). Martin (2003) writes that "the point of the

show remains the same as that of all reality shows: to take delight in others' misfortune, discomfort, embarrassment, pain or suffering" (p. 21).

It is also possible that audiences prefer reality television's humiliations as part of a larger trend in which they seek more intensity and grittiness from television in general. Post 9/11, viewers may have grown acclimated to dramatic, intense, gritty, real events being shown on television and aren't satisfied with the mild, formulaic, mollifying, and now boring programming of the past. Television has become more graphic (e.g., CSI and CSI: Miami) and intense. "Discomfort TV' - lives to rattle viewers' cages. It provokes. It offends."(Conlin, 2003). Perhaps people are more accustomed to horrifying events occurring in life outside of television, so that when a program contends that it is real, they want and expect it to produce dramatic psychological effects.

How reality television may affect viewers

Many have speculated as to what the effects of reality television, at least its latest incarnations, could have on viewers and participants, but little has been demonstrated empirically. Those who criticize the genre generally regard these effects as negative, including everything from high divorce rates to low self-esteem. The paragraphs to follow detail some of the perspectives and studies regarding the effects of this genre.

Divorce and infidelity

In a debate on the CNN program *Crossfire*, Sandy Rios, of Concerned Women for America suggested that our culture is reflecting the "bad stuff" displayed by reality television, saying, "We've got a 50 percent divorce rate at least. So when you present programs like these where the end game is marriage, based on marrying this fake millionaire or a marriage based on picking out 25 girls the one who, you know, rings your chimes the best, that's a terrible way to

choose a mate.” On the other hand, film critic and radio talk show host Michael Medved argued with Rios, noting that by showing the female contestant saying that her biggest dream in life is to get married and have children, the program promotes family values.

By looking at shows like “Joe Millionaire” as a positive thing, Medved may be in the minority among critics. Influenced by the barrage of reality dating shows such as *Blind Date* and *Temptation Island* dominating the airwaves, many critics see reality television as a major contributor to the end of fidelity in our society.

Desensitization of youth

The trend-seeking and setting youth in America seem to be attracted to the shock value of reality TV. “[W]hy can’t we unify around something that isn’t as horrifically demeaning as women trying to seduce a man they believe to be rich?” writes high school student and *Perfect World* staff writer Erica Rothman. “And boy, do teenagers like shock value. The truly shocking thing is that our culture has been reduced to this: people skydiving into vats of pudding for cash, cash, cash. Shock me and make money off it. It sounds cynical, and it is. But what can I say? I’m a jaded teenager whose attention is only snagged by extremes.”

Self-esteem and values

Whether negatively or positively, many feel that these shows invariably affect the self-esteem of the viewer. According to Austin Wood, staff writer for *The Vanguard*, reality television programs represent an opportunity for people to watch people, a natural human inclination. At the same time, he is skeptical of the effects that this habit may have on the viewer, saying, “Producers of reality shows are really just ruining the self-esteem of everyone who watches. Whether you think you are better than the world or feel as if nice guys finish last, reality [television] is to blame.”

Along with the belief that reality ruins the self-esteem of viewers, is the belief that these shows are clouding the value system in society. Revisiting *Crossfire*, Rios argues, "This guy Joe, whoever he is, makes \$19,000 a year, as a construction worker. But the joke is 'ha, ha,' he's really worthless. Ha ha ha. Everybody thinks he has money, he has power, but he really doesn't. He's a jerk. He's worthless. Joe might be a very good guy. This is the wrong value system." Something may be said about our desire to see others being humiliated, and to laugh at or pity others. Many believe that one of reality's most successful shows, *American Idol*, wouldn't be so successful were it not for the judges' frequent unsympathetic comments directed at the contestants. Another writer of *The Vanguard*, Jephreda Hudson, admits that watching Simon Cowell berate the show's contestants is "a guilty pleasure of mine." "Our own lives may be the pits, full of stupidity and poor choices, but we can always watch a reality show and smugly say to ourselves: 'At least I wouldn't do *that*. Not in front of 30 million people, *anyway*,'" writes *Albuquerque* author Steve Brewer.

On the other hand, some columnists regard the "guilty pleasure" of finding amusement in other people's humiliation as simply a delusion, a false sense of security about our own lives. *Miami Herald* columnist Leonard Pitts Jr. writes, that "in encouraging us to ridicule the unschooled, the unsophisticated and the unfortunate, television doesn't just trivialize their lives, it coarsens ours."

Positive effects

Not all critics believe reality television is bad for American culture. For some, it is a positive distraction from the post-9/11 tensions in society, and for some writers, like *Time*'s James Poniewozik, it is simply great television. In an article titled "Why Reality TV is Good For Us," he writes, "reality TV is, in fact, the best thing to happen to television in several years. It has

given the networks water-cooler buzz again, it has reminded viewers jaded by sitcoms and dramas why TV can be exciting; and at its best, it is teaching TV a new way to tell involving human stories.” For Poniewozik, viewers are not just responding to humiliation, as most critics seem to argue, but they are responding to seeing people pursue their dreams, and to human “slice[s] of life, more authentic than any *ER* subplot.”

Research questions

Clearly media commentators and others have many theories to explain the appeal and popularity of the recent wave of reality television programs, and are concerned about whether and how reality television programming is influencing our attitudes, values and behaviors, and our culture. What is lacking is a systematic examination of these questions and concerns. To begin to address this need, three research questions were examined in this study:

- RQ1. What are the characteristics of programs in the reality television genre?
- RQ2. What are the principal appeals of reality television programs to viewers?
- RQ3. What effects do reality television programming have on those that watch it?

Method

To address the first research question, regarding the characteristics of reality television programs, web sites such as RealityTVlinks.com were used to compile a comprehensive list of 130 programs considered to represent the genre in February 2003. Based on program descriptions (and the knowledge of the researchers) the programs were then classified as to whether they were

1. Competitive (whether a central theme of the show involved participants competing for a prize)
2. Participatory (whether the audience actually physically participated in the show),

3. Judgmental (whether or not participants were judged on a specific talent or merit by a panel on the show)
4. Primitive voyeuristic (whether or not the audience had a view of the participants acting naturally in a natural environment)
5. Game show format (whether or not the show followed a traditional game show program format)
6. Documentary (whether or not the show was merely a chronicle of real events with no influence by producers).

Research questions 2 and 3, regarding the appeal and effects of reality television programming, were examined via a pilot version of an online survey. As noted above, programs considered in the popular culture to represent the reality television genre have very diverse characteristics. Because the controversies and questions surrounding the genre concern a specific subset of these programs, the survey focused only on programs that fit the definition developed above, i.e., those classified as primitive-voyeuristic.

Sampling procedure

The survey was administered online to 77 adults using a nonrandom sample drawn mostly from college students. This initial sample is primarily purposive, chosen to represent the demographic (mainly in terms of age) of the reality television viewership, but a few of the respondents were accidental or convenient. The target population was people interested in and familiar with the reality television phenomenon. Although it is clearly a limitation in generalizing the results, the small sample size for this first, pilot study was deemed large enough to be used to begin addressing the research questions; the authors are currently obtaining responses from additional members of the target population.

A message was sent to several electronic listservs at a large public university in the northeastern U.S. urging recipients to contribute to the study by visiting the web location of the online survey. Other people were nonrandomly selected, including students from other college programs, friends in the target reality TV viewership demographic, and people in other areas of media vocation and academia. The survey included a mechanism to filter respondents to only those with relevant information for the study: In the first section, designed to establish the viewing habits of the sample, respondents were asked whether they ever watched a reality TV show. Those who responded “no” were prompted to “click here,” which sent them to the last section of the survey, designed to measure demographics. All responses from those who reported not viewing reality television programs were removed from the data. Although this procedure results in a sample that cannot be generalized to the nation’s population, the sample does represent an important segment of the reality TV viewer population, and by removing nonviewers, provides appropriate material for analysis.

The responses were gathered over approximately 3.5 weeks in the spring of 2003.

Operationalization

The survey contained a total of 47 items divided into three sets. The first few questions asked the respondent about their TV viewing habits, i.e., the type of programs they watch, what hours they watch TV the most, etc. After establishing whether the respondent is a TV viewer at all, specific questions were asked about reality television. These were all closed-ended questions, the final one being an inventory question that asked the respondent what specific reality shows they watch.

The next, and most substantial and significant set of items dealt with the reasons for and effects of watching reality television. In this section, items all with a 10-point Likert “Strongly

Disagree” to “Strongly Agree” response scale, were divided into the two categories (reasons and effects), and then into sub-categories based on the literature reviewed above; the questions were systematically interspersed throughout the section of the survey. The following sub-categories, were assessed, with a maximum of three questions per sub-category (identified by italics):

Questions on reasons why respondent watches reality television programming

- a. Unpredictability - the shows are *unscripted*.
- b. *Social* currency - the shows are popular conversation topics.
- c. The shows give the viewer a feeling of *superiority*.
- d. The shows allow for *voyeurism*.
- e. Need for graphic television post-9/11 - the shows have *shock* value.
- f. The shows provide an *escape*.
- g. The shows enhance the viewer’s *mood*.
- h. Viewers *identify* with contestants.

Questions on effects of watching reality television programming

- a. Increase of, or change in *social* interaction.
- b. *Desensitization* of emotion (i.e. shock).
- c. Superiority – short-term after viewing.
- d. *Morality/competition* – perceived changing traditional values.
- e. *Morality/honesty* – perceived changing traditional values.
- f. *Morality/romance* – trivializing relationships.

Similarly structured or closely related questions were separated in the survey to neutralize the possible effect of respondents giving rushed answers. The 10-point, rather than the conventional 5-point scale, was administered for three reasons: one, to give respondents a more

visual system upon which to evaluate their response (rather than matching their responses to numbers); two, to increase the appearance that the intervals are equal so that analyses appropriate for interval level variables could be used appropriately; and three, to eliminate the neutral response that questionnaire respondents often choose to avoid expressing a view.

The items in this set were statements rather than questions. Respondents were asked to identify their level of agreement or disagreement. Statements designed to determine why people watch reality shows were distinguishable by the inclusion of the terms “like” or “because”. For example, “I *like* that reality TV shows are unscripted,” “I watch reality TV *because* it makes me feel better about myself,” and “I *like* reality TV *because* it puts me in a good mood” are all examples of “reason” questions. “Watching reality TV makes me happy” is an example of an “effect” question.

In the final set of items, demographic characteristics of respondents were measured. The very last item was an open ended question that allowed respondents to freely express their sentiments about reality television (and the survey).

Results

Characteristics of reality television programs

Table 1 summarizes the characteristics of 130 reality programs. 67 of the programs (51.5%) were competitive (involved participants competing for a prize), 18 (13.8%) were participatory (the audience physically participated in the program), 29 (22.3%) were judgmental (participants were judged on a talent or merit), 68 (52.3%) were primitive voyeuristic (the audience had a view of the participants acting naturally in a natural environment), 21 (16.2%)

used the traditional game show format, and 25 (19.2%) were documentaries (chronicles of real events with no influence by producers).

Table 1. Categorization of 130 Reality Television Programs

Television Program	Competitive	Participatory	Judgmental	Primitive Voyeur	Game Show Format	Documentary
<i>Adrenaline X</i>	X					
<i>All American Girl</i>	X	X	X			
<i>All You Need Is Love</i>						
<i>Amazing Race</i>	X					
<i>American Candidate</i>	X	X				
<i>American Fighter Pilots</i>				X		X
<i>American High</i>				X		X
<i>American Idol</i>	X	X	X			
<i>America's Next Top Model</i>	X	X	X			
<i>Anna Nicole Smith's Show</i>				X		
<i>Are You Hot?</i>	X	X	X			
<i>artistlaunch</i>				X		
<i>The Bachelor/The Bachelorette</i>	X			X		
<i>Bachelorettes in Alaska</i>	X			X		
<i>Bands on the Run</i>	X					
<i>Battle of the Sexes</i>	X					
<i>Big Brother</i>	X	X		X		
<i>Boot Camp</i>	X					
<i>Boston 24/7</i>				X		X
<i>Break In</i>	X					
<i>Cannonball Run</i>	X					
<i>Cathouse</i>				X		X
<i>Celebrity Boxing</i>	X		X			
<i>Celebrity Look Alike Dating</i>				X		
<i>The Chair</i>					X	
<i>Chains of Love</i>	X					
<i>Challenge America</i>				X		
<i>The Chamber</i>					X	
<i>Cheaters</i>				X		
<i>Colonial House</i>				X		
<i>Combat Missions</i>	X					
<i>Crashing With</i>				X		
<i>Crime and Punishment</i>				X		X
<i>Cupid</i>	X					

<i>Danger Island</i>	X			X		
<i>Dating Experiment</i>	X			X		
<i>Destination Space</i>	X			X		
<i>Dog Eat Dog</i>					X	
<i>Dot Comedy</i>						
<i>Dream Chasers</i>	X	X				
<i>Eco-Challenge</i>	X				X	
<i>Elimidate Deluxe</i>				X		
<i>Exhausted</i>	X			X		
<i>Extreme Makeover</i>				X		
<i>Faking It</i>			X		X	
<i>The Family</i>	X		X	X		
<i>Fantasy Island</i>				X	X	
<i>Fear Factor</i>	X				X	
<i>Final Justice</i>				X		X
<i>FM Nation</i>				X		X
<i>Fraternity Life</i>				X		X
<i>Frontier House</i>				X		
<i>The Hamptons</i>				X		
<i>Hard Knocks</i>				X		X
<i>High School Reunion</i>				X		
<i>Hopkins 24/7</i>				X		
<i>Houseguest</i>				X		
<i>Houston Medical</i>				X		X
<i>I'm a Celebrity</i>	X	X				
<i>Invasion of the Hidden Cameras</i>						
<i>The It Factor</i>				X		
<i>I Want A Divorce</i>	X				X	
<i>Jailbreak</i>	X				X	
<i>Joe Millionaire</i>	X					
<i>Krypton Factor</i>	X				X	
<i>Last Comic Standing</i>	X		X	X		
<i>Let's Make A Deal</i>					X	
<i>Liza and David</i>				X		X
<i>Lost</i>	X		X	X		
<i>Lost in the USA</i>	X				X	
<i>Love Cruise</i>				X	X	
<i>Love Shack</i>	X			X		
<i>Love Stories</i>				X		X
<i>Making the Band</i>	X					
<i>Manhunt</i>	X				X	
<i>Married by America</i>	X	X	X			
<i>Meet My Folks</i>	X		X	X		

<i>Meet the Marks</i>				X		
<i>Miss America Dog</i>			X		X	
<i>The Mole</i>	X				X	
<i>mtvTreatment</i>				X		X
<i>Murder in Small Town X</i>	X				X	
<i>My Life is a Sitcom</i>	X					
<i>Nashville Star</i>	X	X	X			
<i>Next Action Star</i>	X		X			
<i>No Boundaries</i>	X					
<i>North Shore</i>	X			X		
<i>The Osbornes</i>				X		
<i>The People Versus</i>					X	
<i>Popstars</i>				X		X
<i>Profiles from the Frontlines</i>				X		X
<i>Project Greenlight</i>	X		X	X		X
<i>Public Property</i>		X		X		
<i>Race to the Altar</i>	X	X	X	X	X	X
<i>Real Beverly Hillbillies</i>				X		X
<i>RealityRun</i>	X	X				
<i>The Real World</i>				X		
<i>Rivals</i>	X					
<i>Road Rules</i>				X		
<i>The Runner</i>	X	X				
<i>Search for a Playboy Centerfold</i>	X		X	X		X
<i>Search for the Most Talented Kid</i>	X	X	X			
<i>Second Chance Idol</i>	X	X	X			
<i>Sexiest Bachelor Contest</i>	X		X			
<i>Simple Life</i>				X		X
<i>Single Girls</i>				X		
<i>Sorority Life</i>				X		
<i>Spy TV</i>				X		
<i>Star Dates</i>				X		
<i>Star Search</i>	X	X	X			
<i>State v.</i>				X		X
<i>Surreal life</i>	X			X		
<i>Survivor</i>	X		X	X		
<i>Suspect: True Crime Stories</i>				X		X
<i>The Swap</i>				X		
<i>Temptation Island</i>	X			X		
<i>Thirty Seconds to Fame</i>	X	X	X			
<i>Trading Spaces</i>				X		
<i>Under One Roof</i>						

<i>Wanted</i>	x					
<i>Weakist Link</i>						x
<i>What Not To Wear</i>			x			
<i>Who's Got Game?</i>	x		x	x		
<i>Who Wants to be a Millionaire</i>						x
<i>Who Wants to Date a Hooters Girl?</i>	x		x			
<i>Who Wants to Marry My Mom?</i>	x		x			
<i>The Will</i>	x		x		x	
<i>Worst Case Scenario</i>				x		
<i>WWF Tough Enough</i>	x		x		x	
<i>You Don't Know Jack</i>						x

Respondent profile

Seventy-three percent of the respondents to the online survey were females, 92.2 percent of them were between 18 and 39 years old, and 68.8 percent were white while 14.3 percent were African American. Most of the respondents (85.7%) were students; 53.2 percent of these were undergraduates and 32.5% were graduate students. Fifty-one percent of all of the respondents reported having an annual income under \$15,000, with another 18.2 percent between \$15,000 and \$30,000.

Over half of the respondents (54.5%) reported watching 2-3 hours of television on the average day, with 22.1% watching an hour or less and 18.2% watching 4-5 hours. Nearly three quarters of them (72.7%) reported they watch most television in the evening/primetime hours. TV comedy (36.4%), drama (18.2%), news/documentary, reality TV (11.7%) and sports (10.4%) were the most frequently cited types of programming watched by the respondents.

All of the respondents reported having watched at least one reality television program and the mean number of programs they said they watched in a typical week was 1.96 ($SD=2.7$). The programs they most frequently reported watching were *Real World* (77.9%), *Trading Spaces* (63.6%), *Joe Millionaire* (62.3%), *American Idol* (61.0%), *The Osbournes* (61.0%), *Road Rules*

58.4%), and *Survivor* (57.1%). On a 10 point Likert scale the mean response to the statement, “I enjoy watching reality TV shows” was 5.59 (SD=2.52).

Motivations for viewing reality television

The results for the survey questions that address the second research question, regarding the possible reasons for watching reality television programs, can be seen in Table 2.

Table 2. Means and Standard Deviations for Reasons for Viewing Reality Television (in Descending Order)

Question	Mean	SD
I like it when something unexpected occurs on reality TV shows.	6.96	2.556
I enjoy trying to guess what will happen on reality TV shows.	6.23	2.533
I like watching people on reality TV shows when they forget they're on camera.	6.03	2.703
I like that reality TV shows are unscripted.	5.77	2.462
I like being able to talk about reality TV shows with people I know	5.18	2.810
I like watching reality TV shows because it provides me an escape from the news	4.82	2.927
I like watching reality TV because it is intense	4.59	2.522
I like watching reality TV because it is shocking	4.42	2.428
I enjoy watching how people behave on reality TV because they have low morals and values.	4.30	2.522
I like reality TV because it puts me in good moods.	4.29	2.234
I like watching reality TV because I can see how people really act and think	4.00	2.787
I hate when I miss an episode of a popular reality show and everyone's talking about it.	3.89	3.031
I like watching reality TV because I can relate to the participants.	3.28	2.480

Respondents reported that they watched reality television programs primarily to see something unexpected, e.g., they agreed most strongly with the statements “I like it when something unexpected occurs on reality TV shows” ($M = 6.96$), “I enjoy trying to guess what will happen on reality TV shows” ($M = 6.23$), and “I like that reality TV shows are unscripted” ($M = 5.77$). Nearly half of the respondents (46.2%) strongly agreed (scale values 8, 9 and 10) with the first of these statements.

Among the other reason statements, “I like watching people on reality TV shows when they forget they’re on camera,” suggesting an interest in voyeuristic observation, and “I like being able to talk about reality TV shows with people I know,” suggesting social utility, were the only ones with which respondents agreed (mean responses above the scale midpoint).

Many respondents criticized reality TV shows in the open ended question, describing them as “trash” or a “waste of programming,” but feeling superior to the program participants was not a strong reason for them to watch shows. Nearly 70% of them disagreed with the statement, “I like it because people have low morals and values.”

Respondents disagreed with the statement, ‘I like watching reality TV because I can relate to the participants’ ($M = 3.28$), which was designed to measure their ‘identification’ with program participants.

Effects of viewing reality television

The results for the survey questions that address the second research question, regarding the possible effects of watching reality television programs, can be seen in Table 2.

Table 3. Means and Standard Deviations for Effects of Viewing Reality Television (in Descending Order)

Question	Mean	SD
Reality TV no longer shocks me like it once did.	7.30	2.473
Watching reality dating shows makes me value my relationship with my significant other more.	6.58	2.457
Watching reality TV makes me question other people's honesty.	5.85	2.834
Watching reality TV makes me feel smarter than the participants in the show.	5.84	2.672
Reality TV shows should feature more provocative material to hold my interest.	5.79	3.084
Watching reality TV makes me think that good guys usually finish last.	5.20	3.254
Watching reality TV makes me think that appearance is often more important than intelligence.	5.15	2.943
Watching reality TV makes me think that sometimes you have to be mean to get what you want.	4.70	2.598
Watching reality TV makes me happy.	4.68	2.750
Watching reality dating shows makes me think that there are other factors to consider than love in building a relationship.	4.60	2.644
Watching reality TV makes me feel that I have stronger morals and values than the participants in the show.	4.21	2.800
Watching reality TV makes me feel better about myself.	3.35	2.560
Watching reality TV makes me think it's good to date someone who is wealthy.	3.32	2.982
Generally, reality TV shows leave me in a bad mood.	3.25	2.268
Watching reality TV makes me think that lying is a good way to get a head.	2.85	2.033
I find myself talking to people more frequently because of reality TV.	2.79	2.070

Respondents indicated that they are becoming desensitized to the extreme content of reality programs (e.g., “Reality TV no longer shocks me like it once did” (M = 7.30) and “Reality

TV shows should feature more provocative material to hold my interest” ($M = 5.79$). They also reported a perceived deterioration in traditional values regarding honesty (“Watching reality TV makes me question other people’s honesty ($M = 5.85$)), romance (“Watching reality TV makes me think that appearance is often more important than intelligence ($M = 5.15$)) and the competitive nature of society (“Watching reality TV makes me think that good guys usually finish last” ($M = 5.20$)). On the other hand, reality television apparently doesn’t affect these respondents’ social interaction (“I find myself talking to people more frequently because of reality TV” ($M = 2.79$)).

Here are some comments from respondents (in the open ended question) regarding how they perceive the reality television genre.

“I feel compelled to watch sometimes because I’m fascinated by my own fascination.

Watching the Bachelor makes me feel creepy but sometimes I just can’t take my eyes off of it. I’m trying to understand why. People are shallow and not interesting at all. Yet I want to find out what’s going to happen to them. I find myself feeling superior to them most of the time”.

“Reality TV is entertaining. I enjoy seeing situations, either real or manufactured, and watching people’s reaction, in order to compare them to myself and what I would do.”

“Reality shows make me realize that I am human. Seeing people in their true light makes me reflect upon myself.”

Discussion

The recent extraordinary growth in reality television programming has been the subject of considerable commentary by media critics but almost no attention from communication scholars.

The results of this exploratory study suggest that over half of the current programs publicly identified as being part of the genre use what arguably is the core feature of the latest wave of reality programs, a primitive voyeuristic format in which the audience has a view of the participants acting naturally in their environment. Approximately half of the programs also involve a staged competition of some sort. The term “reality” is usually a misnomer, since only a fifth of them are documentarian chronicles of events uninfluenced (or created) by the producers. This wave of reality programming also is different than the traditional reality program format of game show.

The pilot survey results suggest that a significant motivation for viewing reality television is the opportunity to see something unexpected, unscripted, and “natural,” rather than to feel superior to or identify with the program participants, while the potential effects of viewing include a desensitization and increasing need for provocative content, and a more cynical view of the morality of American society in the form of its members honesty, the appropriate role of physical attractiveness in relationships, and fairness in competition.

Much of this is consistent with punditry that suggests that because the events of September 11, 2001 were extraordinarily “real” and intensely felt in America, the formulaic cop shows and sitcoms no longer satisfy our need for distraction and stimulation. The results are also consistent with claims that the competition between producers to create increasingly outlandish program formats and content may also be coarsening our culture and our perceptions of it.

This study is only a first step in understanding the nature, viewer motivations and influences of reality television. The small sample of viewers in the pilot study watch but are not the strongest fans of reality television; the authors are in the process of supplementing the sample to get a better sense of viewer perceptions. Additional analyses will be conducted to assess

gender differences, as well as those based on other demographic characteristics. Although the current survey provides an opportunity for respondents to express their views in an open ended “comments” question, some of their written remarks suggest that in depth interviews would elicit even more intriguing and insightful comments. The audience’s immediate reaction to reality television would also be interesting in an experimental setting, which would also allow a more valid assessment of the actual influences of viewing these programs. In any case, the phenomenon of reality television is here to stay and communication scholars (and others) have much to gain from systematically exploring its role in our lives and our culture.

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