

# Ethics & Reality TV

## Should We Really Watch?

Media both in America and around the world seem to have "discovered" that so-called "reality" shows are very profitable, resulting in a growing string of such shows in recent years. Although not all are successful, many do achieve significant popularity and cultural prominence. That does not mean, however, that they are good for society or that they should be aired.

The first thing to keep in mind is that "Reality TV" is nothing new - one of the most popular examples of this sort of entertainment is also one of the oldest, "Candid Camera." Originally created by Allen Funt, it showcased hidden video of people in all manner of unusual and strange situations and was popular for many years. Even game shows, long a standard on television, are a sort of "Reality TV."

Today's programming, including a new version of "Candid Camera" produced by Funt's son, goes quite a bit further. The primary basis for many of these shows (but not all) seems to be to put people in painful, embarrassing, and humiliating situations for the rest of us to watch - and, presumably, laugh at and be entertained by.

These reality TV shows wouldn't be made if we didn't watch them, so why do we watch them? Either we find them entertaining or we find them so shocking that we are simply unable to turn away. I'm not sure that the latter is an entirely defensible reason for supporting such programming; turning away is as easy as hitting a button on the remote control. The former, however, is a bit more interesting.

### **Humiliation as Entertainment**

What we are looking at here is, I think, an extension of Schadenfreude, a German word used to describe people's delight and entertainment at the failings and problems of others. If you laugh at someone slipping on the ice, that's Schadenfreude. If you take pleasure in the downfall of a company you dislike, that is also Schadenfreude. The latter example is certainly understandable, but I don't think that's what we're seeing here. After all, we don't know the people on reality shows.

So what causes us to derive entertainment from the suffering of others? Certainly there may be catharsis involved, but that is also achieved through fiction - we don't need to see a real person suffer in order to have a cathartic experience. Perhaps we are simply happy that these things aren't happening to us, but that seems more reasonable when we see something accidental and spontaneous rather than something deliberately staged for our amusement.

That people do suffer on some reality TV shows is beyond question - the very existence of reality programming may be threatened by the increase in lawsuits by people who have been injured and/or traumatized by the stunts these shows have staged. One of the reasons

such programming is attractive is that it can be much cheaper than traditional shows, but that may change as insurance premiums for reality TV begin to reflect higher to insurers. There is never any attempt to justify these shows as enriching or worthwhile in any way, though certainly not every program needs to be educational or highbrow. Nevertheless, it **does** raise the question as to why they are made. Perhaps a clue about what is going on lies in the aforementioned lawsuits. According to Barry B. Langberg, a Los Angeles lawyer who represents one couple:

Something like this is done for no other reason than to embarrass people or humiliate them or scare them. The producers don't care about human feelings. They don't care about being decent. They only care about money."

Comments from various reality TV producers often fail to demonstrate much sympathy or concern with what their subjects experience - what we are seeing is a great callousness towards other human beings who are treated as means towards achieving financial and commercial success, regardless of the consequences for them. Injuries, humiliation, suffering, and higher insurance rates are all just the "cost of doing business" and a requirement for being edgier.

### **Where's the Reality?**

One of the attractions of reality television is the supposed "reality" of it - unscripted and unplanned situations and reactions. One of the ethical problems of reality television is the fact that it isn't nearly as "real" as it pretends to be. At least in dramatic shows one can expect the audience to understand that what they see on the screen doesn't necessarily reflect the reality of the actors' lives; the same, however, cannot be said for heavily edited and contrived scenes on sees on reality shows.

There is now a growing concern about how reality television shows can help perpetuate racial stereotypes. In many shows a similar black female character has been featured - all different women, but very similar character traits. It's gone so far that Africana.com has trademarked the expression The Evil Black Woman to describe this sort of individual: brazen, aggressive, pointing fingers, and always lecturing others on how to behave. [MSNBC](#) has reported on the matter, noting that after so many "reality" programs, we can discern a pattern of "characters" that isn't very far different from the stock characters found in fictional programming. There's the sweet and naive person from a small town looking to make it big while still retaining small-town values. There's the party girl/guy who's always looking for a good time and who shocks those around them. There's the aforementioned Evil Black Woman with an Attitude, or sometimes Black Man with an Attitude - and the list goes on.

MSNBC quotes Todd Boyd, critical-studies professor at the University of Southern California's School of Cinema-Television as saying "We know all these shows are edited and manipulated to create images that look real and sort of exist in real time. But really what we have is a construction. ... The whole enterprise of reality television relies on stereotypes. It relies on common stock, easily identifiable images." Why do these stock characters exist, even in so-called "reality" television that it supposed to be unscripted and unplanned? Because that's the nature of entertainment. Drama is more readily propelled by the use of stock characters because the less you have to think about who a person really is, the more quickly the show can get to things like the plot (such as it

may be). Sex and race are especially useful for stock characterizations because they can pull from a long and rich history of social stereotypes.

This is especially problematic when so few minorities appear in programming, whether reality or dramatic, because those few individuals end up being representatives of their entire group. A single angry white man is just an angry white man, while an angry black man is an indication of how all black men "really" are. MSNBC explains:

"Indeed, the [Sista With an Attitude] feeds off preconceived notions of African American women. After all, she's an archetype as old as D.W. Griffith, first found in the earliest of movies where slave women were depicted as ornery and cantankerous, uppity Negresses who couldn't be trusted to remember their place. Think Hattie McDaniel in "Gone With the Wind," bossing and fussing as she yanked and tugged on Miss Scarlett's corset strings. Or Sapphire Stevens on the much-pilloried "Amos N' Andy," serving up confrontation on a platter, extra-spicy, don't hold the sass. Or Florence, the mouthy maid on "The Jeffersons."

How do stock characters appear in "unscripted" reality shows? First, the people themselves contribute to the creation of these characters because they know, even if unconsciously, that certain behavior is more likely to get them air time. Second, the shows editors contribute mightily to the creation of these characters because they completely validate just that motivation. A black woman sitting around, smiling, isn't perceived to be as entertaining as a black woman pointing her finger at a white man and angrily telling him what to do. An especially good (or egregious) example of this can be found in Manigault-Stallworth, a star of Donald Trump's "The Apprentice." She has been called "the most hated woman on television" because of the behavior and attitude people see her with. But how much of her on-screen persona is real and how much is a creation of the shows editors? Quite a lot of the latter, according to Manigault-Stallworth in an email quoted by MSNBC:

"What you see on the show is a gross misrepresentation of who I am. For instance they never show me smiling, it's just not consistent with the negative portrayal of me that they want to present. Last week they portrayed me as lazy and pretending to be hurt to get out of working, when in fact I had a concussion due to my serious injury on the set and spent nearly ... 10 hours in the emergency room. It's all in the editing!" Reality television shows are not documentaries. People are not put into situations simply to see how they react - the situations are heavily contrived, they are altered in order to make things interesting, and large amounts of footage are heavily edited into what the show's producers think will result in the best entertainment value for viewers. Entertainment, of course, often comes from conflict - so conflict will be created where none exists. If the show cannot incite conflict during the filming, it can be created in how pieces of footage are stitched together. It's all in what they choose to reveal to you - or not reveal, as the case may be.

### **Moral Responsibility**

If a production company creates a show with the explicit intention of trying to make money from the humiliation and suffering which they themselves create for unsuspecting people, then that seems to me to be immoral and unconscionable. I simply cannot think of any excuse for such actions - pointing out that others are willing to watch such events does

not relieve them of the responsibility for having orchestrated the events and willed the reactions in the first place. The mere fact that they **want** others to experience humiliation, embarrassment, and/or suffering (and simply in order to increase earnings) is itself unethical; actually going forward with it is even worse.

What of the responsibility of the reality TV advertisers? Their funding makes such programming possible, and therefore they must shoulder part of the blame as well. An ethical position would be to refuse to underwrite any programming, no matter how popular, if it is designed to deliberately cause others humiliation, embarrassment, or suffering. It's immoral to do such things for fun (especially on a regular basis), so it's certainly immoral to do it for money or to pay to have it done.

What of the responsibility of contestants? In shows which accost unsuspecting people on the street, there isn't really any. Many, however, have contestants who volunteer and sign releases - so aren't they getting what they deserve? Not necessarily. Releases don't necessarily explain everything that will happen and some are pressured to sign new releases part way through a show in order to have a chance at winning - if they don't, all they have endured up to that point. Regardless, the producers' desire to cause humiliation and suffering in others for profit remains immoral, even if someone volunteers to be the object of humiliation in exchange for money.

Finally, what about the reality TV viewers? If you watch such shows, **why**? If you find that you are entertained by the suffering and humiliation of others, that's a problem. Perhaps an occasional instance wouldn't merit comment, but a weekly schedule of such pleasure is another matter entirely.

I suspect that people's ability and willingness to take pleasure in such things may stem from the increasing separation we experience from others around us. The more distant we are from each other as individuals, the more readily we can objectify each other and fail to experience sympathy and empathy when others around us suffer. The fact that we are witnessing events not in front of us but rather on television, where everything is has an unreal and fictional air about it, probably aids in this process as well.

I'm not saying that you shouldn't watch reality TV programming, but the motivations behind being a viewer are ethically suspect. Instead of passively accepting whatever media companies try to feed you, it would be better to take some time to reflect on **why** such programming is made and **why** you feel attracted to it. Perhaps you will find that your motivations themselves are not so attractive.