

Reality tv shows

[Media](#), [Television](#)



What Reality TV Tells Us about American Culture Reality TV (RTV) and tabloid journalism have often been compared to each other. (Hill 80) Are both bringing out the worst in American culture or are they merely an example of what American culture is all about, holding a mirror up to the audience? Western culture in general and American culture in particular has always been fascinated by two things in regards to what fascinates and intrigues their interests and holds their attention, love and war. It is no different when it comes to reality TV.

These polar opposites are almost always found together in life, as well as in reality TV. In Robin L. Nabi's research presented in the journal article, "Determining Dimensions of Reality: A Concept Mapping of the Reality TV Landscape," he draws the following conclusions from the data gathered, "The MDS [Minimum Data Set] results from both sets of data suggest that the two characteristics most salient to audiences when thinking about reality-based programming are romance and competition." (371) These can come under many names; sex and violence, drama and action, and so on.

But first we need a definition of reality TV in order to limit the scope of this analysis. Dr. Nabi and associates found that the authorities in Television production companies have not set a particular definition in regards to what is and what is not reality TV. Dr. Nabi offers us the following parameters: [There are] several key elements that characterize such programs: (a) people portraying themselves, (b) filmed at least in part in their living or working environment rather than on a set, (c) without a script, (d) with events placed in a narrative context, (e) for the primary purpose of viewer entertainment.

In essence, reality programs are marked by ordinary people engaged in unscripted action and interaction. (Nabi 371) While this guideline certainly makes a good rule of thumb, one other thing must be remembered when dealing with the genre. Unlike real life, reality TV is heavily edited by its producers to synthesize and often even contrive and misconstrue events to make them look more powerful than they were in real life. Most frequently the time frame is condensed from a week of production into twenty or so minutes of RTV.

This condensation eliminates some of the nuances of real life, but often makes it more exciting. Also, editing after the fact has certain advantages as evinced by this analysis of the popular RTV show, "Cops:" [The] narrator provides viewers with information about the suspects that may not be known by the officer at the time of the chase, stop, or initial interview. The audience... may be told at the beginning of the anecdote that the driver of a fleeing car has an outstanding warrant or is intoxicated. The pursuing officers may only know this information after the suspect is apprehended.

Nonetheless, according to the programs, the officer is clearly making the appropriate choice by following his or her hunch. Viewers are provided the illusion that they are watching real events unfold but with knowledge based on hindsight (a product of editing), which the officers do not have. (Prosis & Johnson 73) This poses to the audience that the arresting officers are clear in their duty and response, but in the reality of the scene, they may have not had such clear cut motives in stopping the suspect.

One of the most prevalent problems associated with this type of programming and across the nations police force, is the dilemma of racial

profiling that can be exacerbated by such justifications. (Proise & Johnson) There is also a paradoxical twist to the predilection of Americans watching RTV. We, as well as many other technically proficient nations, are a culture that is inundated with news, twenty four hours a day seven days a week. There is news even when there is no news to tell. Broadcasters begin to focus on the mundane events of people with the ugliest dogs in the world, or rehash old news events for weeks or months at a time.

However, Americans in droves are focusing on RTV as a seeming balm to this over information. (Javors 35; Papacharissi & Mendelson 358) Perhaps the one difference that RTV has when compared to reality news is that there is always a resolution that seems understandable. This is often not the case in real life. Sometimes missing millionaires lost in flight over the desert are never found, a young girl missing, presumed dead, in Aruba whose body is never located, all this leaves us wanting closure, perhaps RTV gives us that closure.

The knowledge that at the end of the series there is always going to be a winner is a very safe way to be satisfied. The Cops always get their man or woman as the case may be. On an individual basis, what is RTV telling us about us? Papacharissi & Mendelson in their article, "An Exploratory Study of Reality Appeal: Uses and Gratifications of Reality TV Shows," feel that, "The premise of reality TV requires that individuals place themselves on public display, thus forfeiting all claims to personal privacy for the sake of transient fame and the possibility of monetary compensation. (355) So for the possibility of Warhol's fifteen minutes of fame and the glory of the prize, a modeling contract, a million dollars, or the idol of millions, we are willing to

embarrass and expose ourselves to ridicule, if the price is right. This harkens back to early TV and game shows as well as the popular series Candid Camera. Although the reality at the end of Candid Camera was the surprise that you were actually being filmed. There was no payoff other than being on TV and most participants were willing to sign their names on the release forms. This brings us back to our original associate with RTV and tabloid journalism:

A core feature of popular factual television is that it presents information in an entertaining manner. The origins of reality programming point towards a close association with tabloid news... Although the tabloid news connection is often used as evidence of the 'dumbing down' of factual television, the connection can also be used as evidence of the way reality TV attempts to present information to audiences who want to be entertained and informed at the same time. (Hill 80) In Annette Hill's book, *Reality TV: Audiences and Popular Factual Television*, she presents RTV as factual context in an entertainment venue.

A fan of RTV, Ms. Hill feels that it is often the target of cultural profiling in associating it with the less savory aspects of reportage and the lowest common denominator (LCD) of tabloid journalism. Many would argue with her conclusion as she goes on to compare watchers of RTV with fans of horror or violent action movies. To say that fans of violent movies will exhibit violent behavior, she contends, is a gross generalization. The same gross generalization that RTV has fallen prey to is to assume those watchers are simply "voyeurs" with no real life of their own. (Hill 83)

However, psychologist and therapist are viewing RTV with a skeptical eye. They feel that there is an aching psyche in the American culture that is using RTV as a cure, much in the way the Marx referred to religion as being the opiate of the people, or as one writer updates it: Is reality TV the crack cocaine of what critic Marie Winn calls the "plug-in drug?" My answer is yes, when addicts' distorted views of reality make it impossible for them to function in the world outside the tube. Why meet the neighbors when we have the Osbournes? Why take that trip out West? Survivor is on at 9: 00. Breyer 100) Some therapists further see this as the desensitizing of American culture. RTV coupled with the massive bombardment of news, mostly bad, from around the nation and the world is numbing us to any emotional ties to reality. Dr. Irene Javors compares RTV shows to the quick fix junkfoodrestaurants and calls them "fast foodprograms" and states they are as bad for our minds as a constant diet of Double Whoppers with cheese and Chocolate Milk shakes would be to our bodies. She states that, "As a result, we are numbing ourselves to very real life challenges. (35) This makes us more and more unable to respond to life in any real or meaningful way and as technology reduces many interactions to words on a screen, this is not so unbelievable. In a world of justification RTV is not without them. Many proponents argue that RTV shows like American Idol, America's Next Top Model, etc, have about them the lure of the lottery. If the person I am watching become Donald Trump's new apprentice can do that, maybe I can become manager of the Burger King I am working for. A dollar and a dream is the mentality of the masses faced with this existential angst. (Hill 83; Javors 35) We are not alone in this.

In China, often accused of attempting to mimic Western culture, the producers of an RTV show “ Ying Zai Zhongguo,” or translated somehow as “ Win” in English draw a similar conclusion: ...their hope that the program would encourage more people in China to start their own businesses. Song Wenming ...hoped the show would introduce the “ positive power” of entrepreneurship. Ms. Zhou said she hoped potential entrepreneurs would learn the importance of both perseverance and passion. There was much more in the same vein. (Follows) Perhaps there is some altruism at the end of the tunnel when considering the cultural benefit of RTV.

But the preponderance of the evidence seems to suggest that there is something deeply missing in the American psyche that needs to be healed. Is RTV the cure or part of the problem? This is the conundrum that researchers face. Although nothing new, since The Iliad and theOdysseyand before, circled around campfires and telling stories human beings have had some desire for adventure, love, and battles. It is part of our nature, perhaps being suppressed, that RTV touches upon. Is it exploitation or vicarious therapy? This still remains the question.