

## The Appeal, Experience and Impact of Reality Television

Millions tune in. Thousands participate. Hundreds of new programs have been created since its inception. And there seems to be no sign of slowing down.

Reality television is relatively new for the television medium, but it's had an enormous impact on popular culture, specifically how we view and classify "celebrities," our notions of privacy and security, and how much people are willing to see (and do!) on TV for everyone to watch (and with the internet, watch forever). It is consumed in mass quantities. It seems like almost every cable channel has its own brand of reality TV, from TLC's shows about cringe worthy habits (*My Strange Addiction*) to MTV's portrayal of young mothers (*16 & Pregnant*). Every aspect of our lives, from dating (*The Bachelor* and *The Bachelorette*) to choosing a home (*House Hunters*) is being documented and broadcasted.

As viewers, we consume a great deal of this type of television. Therefore, it would be relevant to most people to know what kind of effect this programming is having on an individual and on society as a whole. Reality TV is commonly referred to as "trashy, mindless entertainment," and this implies there is nothing to be learned or gained from viewing it. This research paper aims to explore this claim and delve into what the value of reality TV really is and what effect it has on its viewing audience and the public.

Additionally, if reality programming is pointless, how can we account for high ratings and continuous interest in these shows? There is a large market for reality television, and the genre seems to only become more popular by the day with more and more reality programs premiering with each season. This paper will examine the

proposed reasons as to why reality TV continues to be so popular, even after its demise at one point seemed inevitable (Day).

For this research, I am using several different types of reality TV shows to examine a variety of perspectives and effects they could be having on the audience. They include *Survivor*, *American Pickers* and *Keeping Up With the Kardashians*, among others as examples. These programs cover a wide range of the reality TV spectrum and together represent what I believe to be the major categories within the genre. I will be drawing on psychological and sociological phenomena to explain our sometimes-bizarre attraction to reality television, as well as exploring new research on the effect this programming has on our psyche.

*Survivor* is known as an archetype of the reality show genre. It has been incredibly influential in the development of other reality shows in the 17 years since it first aired. Each season, 16-20 participants are placed on an island and split into tribes to compete for money. *Survivor* represents the competition and social reality show that has become widely popular over the years, along with shows like *Big Brother* and MTV's *The Challenge*. Participants are competing for a prize, but while doing so they must put their social skills to use and interact with other tribe members in a strategic way.

Airing on the History channel, *American Pickers* follows two "pickers" as they travel around the backroads of America looking for "junk" they can flip to make money. Typically, these men are looking for rare collectibles, cool gadgets, old cars and motorcycles – anything they can make a profit on. Weaved throughout the show are tidbits of historical background information about the item they are looking to buy and why it's valuable. This type of reality show highlights a skill or job. Featured subjects are

typically well known in their field for the work they do. Other shows that also aim to document certain occupations include *Ace of Cakes* and *Project Runway*. This type of reality show focuses on spotlighting a craft or occupation. While there are typically dramatic moments or a cliffhanger somewhere in every episode, the overall goal is to document the – usually excellent – job an individual, or a group, is doing.

*Keeping Up with The Kardashians* might be one of the most well-known and influential reality shows in recent history. Not only did it launch the careers of the Kardashian family, but it also forged a new path for reality TV shows to follow the daily lives of quasi-celebrities (who, consequently, become bigger celebrities after a show is aired). These shows include *Jon and Kate Plus 8*, *16 & Pregnant*, and *The Real World*.

Since its proliferation in popular culture, reality TV has only grown in size and impact. Why do viewers continue to demand seemingly redundant content time and time again? First, it could be a perfect combination of advancing technology and communication with supposedly unscripted entertainment. Neal Saye examines this in his article about consumer reality, saying, “perhaps the voyeuristic answer for reality TV’s popularity is not complete; perhaps viewers not only want to peer into strangers’ lives, but also to become (through their viewing, Internet interaction, phone calls, companion product purchases, etc.) a part of the commercial experience.” Shows like *American Idol* and *Big Brother* are perfect examples of the interactive viewer experience. Millions of fans vote to have their say in the outcome of a show, whether that is who should move on to the next singing challenge or what food a group of houseguests must eat for a week. Jesse Hicks continues this analysis in his article exploring why we love reality television, saying, “No longer mere couch potatoes in front of their boob tubes, viewers join the

creative production; the experience feels less like simply watching television and more like being part of a shared national project.” When watching some reality television programs, audiences have the chance to become an integral part of the show. Viewers can become attached to certain contestants, watching a show to see whether their favorite character succeeds or fails; similar to being a sports fan that religiously follows a team throughout a season.

Reality TV is based on the idea of supposedly showcasing real, relatable life events. Whether or not a reality show is scripted or planned might not matter in many instances – what matters is the idea of realism, as the “consumption of reality programming represents a sophisticated quest for authenticity within the traditionally fiction-oriented entertainment paradigm,” (Rose and Wood). If a viewer believes what they are seeing on a reality show is genuine, this perception almost becomes the reality, and the truth becomes somewhat beside the point. For a viewer watching what they believe to be real life, seeing embarrassing or cringe worthy moments experienced by real people inspires a sense of empathy and understanding that can really resonate. As writer Christian Jarrett in an article titled “How Watching Reality TV Might Help Bring Out the Best in Us” puts it, “perhaps we’re attracted to cringe comedy and reality TV as a way to hone our ability to appreciate and understand other people’s social tribulations.” For shows like *Keeping Up With The Kardashians*, viewers tune into to see famous people (or regular people who happen to be on TV) act like normal folk; in a sense looking to relate to public figures on a personal level. These shows attempt to, or at least give the impression of, honestly recording a subjects life, similar to the way a documentary film might. Watching reality television might encourage people to feel empathy for those they

do not know or for those who live a completely different life than they lead. Jarrett concludes, “These new results show reality TV exercises our empathy buttons.”

When examining another hugely popular reality competition show, *The X-Factor*, writer Elizabeth Day also touches on the idea of empathy playing a large role in why audiences continue to tune in to reality programming. She says, “according to the Brand Driver research, which is one of the first substantial examinations into the allure of reality television, the key to the *X-Factor's* appeal is precisely this ability to tap into the notion of personal relationships, into the idea that we want to form an empathetic bond with contestants and feel part of an extended social network.” Not only do viewers express sincere attachment to the participants they see on reality television, they might also feel connected to other viewers who feel as they do.

When watching reality television, viewers tend to compare themselves to the personalities they see on the screen. This act of comparison evokes the idea of the self-evaluation maintenance model (SEM model), which states that a person's self-esteem can actually be boosted when someone they identify with does well through reflection (Tesser). In other words, a viewer might feel proud when a reality character they identify with becomes successful, because they see themselves reflected in this character and therefore feel a sense of accomplishment.

Similarly, audiences can enjoy watching reality television because it allows them to enjoy a – theoretically achievable – fantasy life. In his book “Media Literacy,” W. James Potter argues there are two characteristics people look for when choosing what media to consume. First, the media must have elements of “everyday reality” and the messages presented are “accurate representations or at least plausible and probable.” This

explains why reality shows can typically get away with being semi-scripted, because as long as the situations appear real, the audience is content to believe the claim of reality. Second, the messages presented must reach a little further outside of reality than the typical viewer is accustomed to. This is how Potter defines “next-step reality,” a message “presented as reality to resonate with the audience’s experience and make it have the potential to be useful in everyday situations, but the message is ‘sweetened’ by an extra added ingredient that takes it one step outside of the audience’s everyday existence.” He continues by adding “they want messages that show what is easily possible and make it seem probable and even actual.” In the case of shows like *Keeping Up With the Kardashians*, a viewer sees the extravagant, extraordinary lives these women lead and feel as though they can achieve that level of success one day too. Watching the Kardashians allows a viewer to live vicariously through their actions and enjoy their lavish lifestyle secondhand, with the idea of one day achieving their level of success.

On the other hand, people often revel in seeing reality celebrities embarrassing themselves on the screen because it makes the viewer feel better about him or herself, otherwise known as “downwards self comparison.” This is when an individual will compare themselves to someone they perceive as being underneath them, making this individual feel better about themselves. When one of the Kardashians does something embarrassing or wrong, this can boost a viewers self esteem and make them feel better about their own life.

Hicks summarizes these last couple points well when he writes “people tend to feel better about their own lives when watching the marital turmoil on *Jon & Kate Plus 8*. And viewers can fantasize about becoming stars when watching ordinary people attain

celebrity on shows like *Survivor*.” Simply put, people will want to identify with those who are doing well in life and disassociate with those who are not.

For shows like *American Pickers* that highlight a specific craft, like “picking,” the reality show format allows viewers a look inside a field that might not get as much coverage. This type of show can glorify and romanticize real work, which can be a good thing. The subjects followed are hardworking and knowledgeable, and there naturally is a significant educational aspect to these programs. *Ace of Cakes*, a similar show on Food Network, documents the work environment of a quirky Baltimore bakery headed by Duff Goldman. The show also highlights a specific craft, in this case making elaborate cakes, and much of the focus is on the high quality of the work done and the product being produced. It is the counterargument to the charge that reality shows only give a platform for talentless, undeserving people. In this case, reality TV highlights real work and skill, which is a valuable contribution in the long run. This is a valuable aspect of reality programming. I consider this sub genre of reality television to be the antithesis of the typical reality show. Instead of glorifying overly dramatic, loud characters, the skilled-based reality program focuses on the quality of a person’s work and aims to educate the audience on a certain trade.

Reality television has a bad reputation. From the quintessential clips of women flipping tables to the scandalous love triangles that seem to plague many reality show participants, skeptics dismiss this genre as television trash. However, some of the most successful shows on television today are considered reality TV, from competition shows like *Survivor* to biographical shows like *Keeping Up With The Kardashians*. Viewers are drawn to programs that appeal to their sense of empathy and relatability. Reality TV

promises to present real life, but whether it delivers on this “realness” seems irrelevant. The idea of reality is enough to hook viewers, allowing them to relate to the “real” people they see on the television. Even when shows revolve around atypical situations, such as *Survivor* following a group of people on an island or *Keeping Up With The Kardashians* profiling a family of wealthy socialites, the interactions are alleged to be real, which allows the viewer to simultaneously relate to the characters and fantasize about living an extraordinary life like the ones they see on TV.

Are we achieving anything from this viewing experience? For some shows, we can gain insight into a world completely removed from our own. Whether that is learning about a specific craft, like on *American Pickers*, or a new skill or seeing how another person lives, reality television can enhance our understanding of many different ways of life. In this way, some reality television could be seen as a form of documentary. Both forms of media promise to honestly document real life and real people. Some reality series’ are even referred to as “docu-series” (Chow, Moore, and Yahr). While reality TV is known for much more scripted and staged interactions than the average documentary, both are ultimately victims of ulterior motives, misleading editing, and overstated theatrics, so as a result many of the criticisms of reality TV must be applied to the documentary genre as well.

In the end, reality television may never receive the recognition it may or may not deserve. Regardless, there seems to be no end in sight for these wildly popular programs and the reality stars that are eager to get on television.

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