

Get a Grip on Reality TV

A pastor recently contacted EthicsDaily.com for help understanding the reality TV landscape. “Why are reality shows so hot?” he asked. “What do they say about us as a culture? Are they helpful or detrimental?”

Good questions all. Answers aren’t clear-cut. But we can examine the phenomenon of reality TV and better understand this ever-bigger piece of the pop-culture pie.

First, reality TV uses several draws. Freakish behavior is one special draw for reality TV (“Fear Factor,” parts of “Survivor,” “Guinness World Records,” “Ripley’s Believe It or Not”). Another draw is relationships, particularly relationships as game, whether they’re premised on group dynamics, couples or both (“The Bachelor,” “The Bachelorette,” “Joe Millionaire,” “Big Brother,” “Survivor,” “Meet My Folks,” “Real World,” “Temptation Island”). Sometimes these shows are infused with adventure, but that’s so less interesting without the relationships.

Second, what reality TV has in common with scripted programming is that both need tension, drama and conflict to be interesting. No one cares to sit around watching people be nice to each other all the time. That’s boring and it makes for “bad television.” So, from the perspective of a network executive and a viewer, conflict is good.

Third, the network executives are right—a lot of the time—about what we’ll watch. We do like the tension and the conflict. We might like it because: it helps us understand our own conflicts better; we see that we’re better off than other people; we like to laugh at other people’s foibles. The point is, people can watch for different reasons. There doesn’t have to be just one right answer in this case.

Fourth, reality TV is a good option for networks because it’s cheap, comparatively speaking. A “production gap” has opened in Hollywood. Instead of having a bunch of shows with mid-level budgets, there are: a) scripted programs that pay stars

millions per episode; and b) reality shows that are cheap to produce because average folks will seemingly do anything just to be on television and have a shot at fame. So, this summer, there are dozens of new reality shows. Networks believe they can pull better ratings with new, cheap reality shows instead of re-running their other programs. So reality TV is proliferating.

Fifth, reality shows probably won't disappear entirely, but they probably won't "rule the roost" the way they seem to now. The fad will lose ratings domination. A few shows will appear here and there, some will still be produced for cable networks, and a "reality network" will take shape.

Sixth, and lastly, the big question probably is: Are they good for us? That depends. Factors include:

Are we laughing at other people's misery?

Are we contributing to exploitation of others?

Are we tuning in out of prurient interest?

What's the TV rating? Parental discretion advised?

Is it harmless entertainment?

Are we learning something?

Is this helpful to me in some way?

Has the experience been good for show participants?

There are no doubt other pertinent questions.

If you watch reality TV, remain keenly aware that you're watching television. It has been edited to give viewers more of what they want: tension, conflict and drama. If there's a form of magic in the 21st century, it may well be TV editing.

So ... caveat emptor—buyer beware.

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