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What's So Real About Reality TV?

By David Leonhardt

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But some are "personal growth" shows

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Those people who defend the intrusive presence of a television in private homes always seem to cite "educational value" as its redeeming grace.

They mention the documentaries they watch all the time...which explains why The Feeding Habits of the Gray-haired Stork broke all Nielsen ratings records last month.

They mention the news programs they watch nightly...which explains why they have "intellectual" discussions about the chimp who drove a little car at the charity circus last week.

They mention all the arts programs, such as the symphony orchestra that played them to sleep last night.

Amazingly, they do not mention the latest phenomenon -- "reality TV". What is so real about reality TV? Put 20 people on an island and tell them to live off the land as if they were all on their own. Yeah, like that's real!

But wait, there's more. Make them vote somebody off the island each day, so that there are fewer people to help the community survive. Brilliant survival strategy.

Or set them up in teams to play "survival games". That will leave them a lot of energy for survival. I'll bet the tigers and hyenas and alligators salivate to see so much fresh meat wasting so much energy on such trivial activities. They could not have come up with a better meat-farming plan if they tried.

To make it even more real, all the participants are brought in front of the camera to comment on each other and deliver a psychological assessment of their experiences. Lights. Camera. Psychology. That's

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real.

I suppose we would not want a reality TV show that was TOO real. Imagine turning on the TV and seeing real life.

"Hey, honey. Check out what's on TV."

"What is it, dear."

"Somebody washing dishes."

"What, again?"

"Yes."

"Go on."

"Don't they ever wash their clothes?"

"NO, just dishes."

"Well sooner or later they'll have to wash their clothes. What does the TV guide say?"

People would probably rather watch other people marrying millionaires than have to face the fact that they could enjoy their own lives without having to marry one themselves.

In case you think I am down on all reality TV, there are some shows that actually are not that bad.

For example, American Idol, the biggest reality TV show of all. It was worth watching just to see Simon and Paula kiss and the new, invigorated half-of-Randy agreeing with Simon on almost everything this year.

For example, Canadian Idol, which 3.5 Canadians are aware of.

For example, Australian Idol, except for the Guy guy's hairdo, which IS that bad.

Dr. Phil's Ultimate Weight Loss Challenge is another reality show I like. He took real overweight people who wanted to change not just their bodies but their outlooks on life.

What did these two shows have in common? Both were competitions. Both involved trying to better oneself. Nobody had to vote each other off and they were all one team. Nobody was encouraged to hate. Nobody was encouraged to cheat. In fact, they supported each other emotionally. Imagine that on a desert island. Why, that would almost be real.

Dr. Phil and the Idol machine make sure that everybody walks away a winner. Of course, that's no

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more real than packing men and women together in tight corners with little clothing and prodding them to cheat on their soon-to-be-exes back home. But it is more tasteful, and perhaps more "educational".

But what is most real about these shows is that their real dreams were fulfilled and their real lives have changed as a result.

I have another name for all these new shows, the good and the bad alike, a name that fits them better than "reality TV". I call them "game shows."

What? That name's been taken? Price Is Right? Truth Or Consequences? Wheel of Fortune?

Hmm. I suppose the new reality TV shows are almost as new as they are real. If people want reality, I suppose they could just turn off their TV sets. If they want new, they might just have to improvise.

David Leonhardt publishes The Happy Guy humor

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Sociology Of Reality TV

By Edward Charkow

You know something has permeated a culture when American colleges and universities are charging big money to teach classes about the sociology and psychology of reality TV.

Aside from the more traditional subjects like calculus and European History, college students are paying several grand a semester to collectively watch and discuss Big Brother, American Idol or MTV's The Real World. Students debate questions like "Why is reality TV so popular?" or "Why do people want to be broadcast while using the toilet or failing to discipline their wild children?" I am sure the founders of the great American institutions of learning are backflipping in their graves knowing that students are writing papers about Flavor Flav, but many academics argue that reality TV actually provides a new lens through which to view and interpret our culture. The question remains: Could reality TV actually be teaching us anything, or are these classes just dangling carrots to get more students to pay \$30,000 tuition bills?

No matter what, popular culture has arguably been taken over by television's version of reality. Though these shows are not something many of us wish to put into a time capsule to reflect the condition of American media in the 21st century, most of us cannot get enough of them. There are just as many closet watchers of reality TV as there are self-proclaimed reality addicts. And, it doesn't even seem like the story-line or topic matters anymore - it's the format that grabs us. The same person might watch Project Runway, Making the Band and Flip that House. So perhaps it's just exciting to peer into the

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minds, emotions and lives of others. The popularity of blogs would certainly affirm that. In a time when we know less and less about what goes on behind the doors of the Oval Office or the gilded lobbies of American's largest corporations, it seems we all just want a little bit of truth, or else a whole lot of candor.

Find out more about Reality T.V. at



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