Boring!

How reality programs prospered, proliferated and are now turning off many viewers.

By David Marc and Robert J. Thompson

In 1948, most Americans were still listening to radio during prime time. The networks were still broadcasting their full slates of dramas, situation comedies, variety shows, news, documentaries, dance music, and other popular genres. But the FCC had already issued 108 television licenses and, as David Sarnoff, William Paley and a few hundred executives knew, the handwriting was already on the screen for many of the special aural arts that had been evolving on radio since the 1920s. The three major radio networks were each feeding several hours of daily television service to tiny strings of stations concentrated in the urban corridors of the Northeast, the Great Lakes and California. Appliance stores were stocking sets and roof antennas were popping up on the national skyline for a 30-year moment in the sun. It was a time for 300-ohm wire, vertical hold controls, and replacement tubes.

That summer, for the first time, the nominating conventions of the Democratic and Republican parties were carried on television as well as radio. Though short on content, the baby television networks chose not to cover the nominating conventions of any of the other political parties, despite the fact that two minor-party candidates, arguably representative of two significant segments of the electorate, were also in the race: former vice-president Henry Wallace of Iowa, running on the American Labor Party ticket; and Senator Strom Thurmond of South Carolina of the States Rights Party (known familiarly as the Dixiecrats), a splinter formed by Southern Democrats who had walked out of the Democratic Party's 1948 convention after it adopted a platform plank expressly opposing legal segregation.

Truman won the election, but the Republicans took control of both houses of Congress for the first time since 1932. Neither party was able to deliver its campaign promises; some 60 years later, universal health care, the last piece of the New Deal safety net (proposed in the Democrats' platform) and the government-mandated retirement system remain issues at the center of the American political agenda. As for the minor parties, their defeat and dissolution also tell tales. The political power and membership of American labor unions have since dwindled to fractions of what they had been during the first half of the twentieth century, and labor strikes are as common as critters left off the endangered species

list. As for racial segregation, the century-long Jim Crow regime that followed the banning of slavery has completely lost the force of law. Class-oriented and race-oriented movements have continued to assert influence over voting patterns since 1948, but both have been placed, quite literally, "outside the box" of mainstream politics.

Most Americans, by all accounts, have spent a good deal of their time since 1948 watching television. Barely half the population votes, and one can only imagine how many of them exercise the franchise with the enthusiasm of agnostics sitting in church. Titanic historical events and political organizations continue to move people, but in most cases, that movement occurs to the right or to the left of their couches as they watch things "happen" on TV. If journalism is, as the saying goes, "the first draft of history," then we can be sure it is read more widely than the book.

Unbearable pressures—including racism, environmental degradation, and the perceived disintegration of a workable social order—have moved some people to high levels of personal commitment and to actions appropriate to their social beliefs. For others, however, the delights of the video screen—whether delivered by broadcast, cable, direct satellite transmission, call-up, or broadband—have sufficed to max out the capacity for supra-televisual empathies. The video screen, whether embellished by the comforts of 24/7 climate control and spine-dulling furniture or enhanced by stimulation of illicit, over-the-counter or prescription pharmaceuticals, is compelling enough to satisfy a wide swath of the population.

Political scientists and sociologists who speak of "voter apathy" and who bemoan a lack of citizenship or moral backbone in the population/audience may well have missed a salient point as concerns the survivors of the age of broadcasting. Merely bearing daily witness—even bite-size, CNN-Headline-size, daily witness—to the unending catalog of horrors announced in The News and re-enacted in The Entertainment may be more participation than *homo erectus* was built to withstand. To rise from the couch and actually go somewhere to vote for anybody might threaten some viewers with an assumption of guilt so frightening as to distance them from the grand ideals of the framers of the U.S. Constitution, if they have been so lucky as to have been schooled in those ideals.

But that was the broadcasting era, when people had their programs forcibly interrupted by "urgent messages" and even by planned presidential press conferences. Cable TV and the internet offer more news than ever, but they have removed the coercive burden of newswatching, thus enabling millions of viewers to abandon all contact with the collective mythologies of history, including the daily communion with history that we have come to call "the News." If people would rather be charmed by art than horrified by the world, who can blame them? Perhaps it is the news junkies who are dysfunctional.

The internet has not disrupted the sheer craving for television viewing; in fact, surfing with a well-designed browser on a broadband connection is quite arguably the most addictive form of TV watching yet to reach the market. Asked in 2002 if the internet was having a negative impact on television viewing, Betsy Frank, head of research for the Viacom Corporation's

MTV networks division replied, "What MTV viewers do less of, now that they are spending more time on the internet, is sleeping, talking and personal hygiene." A Gallup poll conducted that same year found television to be "the single most popular way to spend an evening" among Americans, three times more popular than "seeing friends." Why see friends when you can see *Friends* (NBC, 1994--2004)?

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The relationship of radio and television broadcasting to American mass communication in the current century bears comparison to the relationship between railroad travel and American mass transportation since the 1950s. With the construction of the Interstate Highway System and the organization of air travel into a transcontinental mass transit system, the intercity passenger train gradually found itself pushed to the margins of an industry it had once dominated. No longer the imperious engine or symbol of American economy and culture, the passenger train was relegated to serving niche markets, such as megalopolitan center-city commuting and quality-time vacationing for those who continued to see value in viewing the nation's landscape, and doing so in the relative comfort of a vehicle that does not demand physical constraint or legally enforced sobriety. By the 1960s, it became apparent that government subsidies would play a necessary role if trains were to survive at all in the national transportation mix.

This marginality was not the technologically determined "fate" of all intercity railroad passenger travel in the same way that the horse-drawn stagecoach had been made obsolete by the passenger train. It was, rather, the result of consciously made political decisions in the United States that had the effect of withholding the necessary capital investment to keep American rail technology competitive with other forms of transport. Any doubt of this is dismissed with breathtaking speed by a 200-mile-per-hour train ride between Paris and Lyons or Tokyo and Osaka. An important factor in the disinvestment of the passenger train was that most American railroads were as anxious to leave the passenger business as the highway and aviation lobbies were to see them get out of it. The railroads preferred to concentrate their efforts on carrying uncomplaining potatoes and lumps of coal.

The American broadcasting station may be at the same kind of crossroads between viability and marginality that confronted the passenger train in the 1950s. Like the railroad station, the radio station debuted as a spectacular, transformative application of advanced technology and it was developed by private capital with the help of an extraordinary degree of government nurturing and protection. Each took less than a century to mature from a futurist "blue-sky" symbol into a workhorse industry at the heart of the national

economy. In the case of the passenger train, it was technologically elbowed out by the automobile and the airplane into a kind of inglorious semi-retirement, where it sits today, forced to beg for a meager government pension so it can maintain a minimal surviving service, without which it faces oblivion. Are old-fashioned broadcasting stations, the kind that have studios and transmitting towers and a local news operation in Your Town, or in a town nearby, or in a town of some kind, heading for the same fate?

Just as the American transportation industry committed itself to the belief that people can now be delivered more profitably by means other than rail, the American communication industry seems to be coming to the conclusion that advertising (and what it takes to get people to attend to advertising) is more profitably delivered by single-source satellite transmissions than by hundreds of locally transmitted airborne signals.

It is not surprising that news and business news programs are the only daily PBS shows aimed at adult audiences. The flagship is *The NewsHour With Jim Lehrer.* It began in 1969 as the *MacNeil-Lehrer Report,* and is a curious legacy from an era in broadcasting history when the network evening news, as presented by the likes of Cronkite, Chancellor and Howard K. Smith, were considered too brief in the attention span for the many people still thought to read newspapers. In the intervening decades, network news (Rather, Brokaw and Jennings) got much dumber than anyone could have imagined 40 years ago. The importance of the subsidized news on TV can be measured accordingly. Same said for PBS's *Nightly Business Report*, as compared to the market prognosticators who emerged on cable-TV financial advice programs during the dot.com boom (and some of whom are under indictment).

Daniel Schorr, whose investigative work on the Watergate scandals got him fired from CBS in the 1970s, joined NPR soon after he was let go. Three decades later, well past the age when most commercial broadcasting journalists are kicked out of the building, he is one of a very few senior reporters who delivers news analysis on the radio. The commercial competition consists of Paul Harvey.

It would be easy to ennoble the Age of Broadcasting as a golden time when tens of millions of Americans, hungering for knowledge of current events, pressed their ears to the radio and, later, their noses to the TV set. The truth, as is often case, is something less grand. Hindsight seems to indicate that the chief reason for the large pre-cable news audience was that most of the time when news was being broadcast, there was nothing else on. This was due to two factors which are rapidly fading into broadcasting history: (1) channels were scarce because of the limitations of the over-the-air spectrum; and (2) FCC licensing standards, then still in practice, were easily met by all the competitors in a given broadcasting market by counterprogramming news shows against each other. Cable TV and video appliances ended the scarcity problem, and a pop revival of get-the-government-off-of-our-backs capitalism took care of the rest of it.

Offered an increasing number of alternatives, increasing chunks of audience soon demonstrated the same indifference toward broadcast news that they had shown toward newspapers since the advent of broadcasting. Commercial

radio news shriveled into headline scraps and traffic-jam sightings. At the same time, TV news was boutiquing into a taste culture item for "news junkies."

To a mind formed during the Age of Broadcasting, it might follow logically that less broadcast news would have been accompanied by more, and perhaps even better, prime-time dramatic programming on the broadcast networks. However, other conditions of the post-cable entertainment order prevented this from happening. With broadcast network audience share dwindling, but prime-time production costs not, broadcast networks found themselves looking for low-overhead programming ideas, especially formats that could avoid burden of star salaries. Two genres met this need and proliferated through turn-of-Century-21 television: news magazines, which grew in number and frequency; and reality TV shows, which grew in number and freakishness.

In the case of the former, the heritage networks (ABC, CBS, NBC) were attracted by the opportunity to use the fixed costs of their news divisions—including the salaries of correspondents, writers and other production personnel—to generate what amounted to bargain material for prime-time entertainment. The magazine idea itself was nothing new. Pat Weaver, the first head of NBC television, foresaw it in the early 1950s as a mold from which the entire television day might be cast. The original designs of such Weaver programming creations as the *Today Show* (early morning), *Home* (midday), and the *Tonight Show* were essentially magazines, with their emphases shifting to suit the rhythms of the day. After Weaver left NBC, however, the magazine synthesis all but disappeared from the two surviving series, with *Tonight* dropping its news component to become an entertainment vehicle (it had once contained a daily wrap-up from a news correspondent) and *Today* becoming a news division production (it had once featured the chimpanzee J. Fredd Muggs as a cast regular).

The model for the contemporary news magazine is CBS's *60 Minutes*, which premiered in 1968. CBS television, which had a tradition of presenting prime-time news division productions, including such honored series as *See It Now, The Twentieth Century*, and *CBS Reports,* had gradually pulled all weekly news and documentary programs from its prime-time schedule during the early 1960s, giving the slots to more profitable entertainment series.

Throughout the 1980s, NBC tried repeatedly to create a prime-time magazine to give the same kind of promotional boost to its news personalities as its two rivals were getting from *60 Minutes* and *20/20*. The network, however, showed little of the patience that its rivals had demonstrated. Quick cancellations created a collection of failures that soon became the stuff of stand-up comedy routines.

The network finally found a news magazine signature in 1992 with the premiere of *Dateline*. The show's success can be at least partially attributed to the publicity created during its first year when it was revealed that *Dateline* producers had staged, for the cameras, a phony test-crash explosion of a General Motors pick-up truck in an exposé of the vehicle's defective gas tank. As had been the case in the 1950s when quiz shows, including NBC's *Twenty-One*, had been rigged to insure viewer interest, there can be little doubt that an exploding truck was,

indeed, a superior entertainment product in comparison to a non-exploding truck. It can even be argued that, knowing the vehicle to be dangerous (based on the evidence of actual past explosions), the producers were merely putting art in the service of public safety. In any case, critics were outraged that viewers had not been informed by NBC of the difference between art and The News. There wasn't even one of those minuscule, unreadable disclaimers that they sometimes use on these kinds of programs when they're showing animated graphics of a story that would have otherwise had no footage.

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The dual consequences of the exploding *Dateline* truck scandal mark a cusp moment in the historical development of broadcast news: (1) in a homage to the best traditions of American journalism (from, let's say, Zenger to Cronkite), the head of NBC News was forced to resign by the network's high-minded top brass; and (2) *Dateline* had earned for itself a permanent spot on the NBC prime-time schedule from the network's high-ratings-minded top brass.

Accordingly, the 1990s marked a period of unprecedented decay in broadcast journalism. Whereas two decades earlier, facing the threat of jail, Frank Stanton had withheld video outtakes and names of sources used in a CBS documentary concerning corruption at the Pentagon, the CBS of the 1990s was cowed by the tobacco industry into suppressing a piece concerning what and when industry executives knew about the ill effects of smoking.

The free-fall of broadcast news standards in prime time was finally offered a plateau—a position from which it could define and defend itself—by the increasing popularity of reality TV. Anything too ridiculous to be called journalism could be classified as a "reality" show rather than "news," with production responsibility kicked cleanly to the lower expectations of the entertainment division. Entertainment producers, for their part, were happy with the arrangement, which freed them, simultaneously, from the two things they liked least: (1) the "credibility thing," which constrained news magazines from following their entertainment instincts; and (2) the salaries of star actors. In fact, reality shows presented opportunities to work without using any professional actors at all, as most performers in a reality vehicle ask nothing more for their services than a chance to appear on national television. As if that overhead saving is not godsend enough, you can even have some of your nastiest production costs—car crashes, burning buildings, ambulances racing through the streets—picked up by taxpayer-supported municipal agencies.

Though reality programming is usually referred to as a "genre" of television, it is developing in a way that indicates it may be something more than a mere program type. Reality TV is perhaps better understood as a media-age equal partner to those two long-running Aristotelian mega-genres, comedy and tragedy. At its best, Reality is full of comic elements,

especially humor and confusion, as well as the kind of challenges to moral sensibility that are associated with tragic drama. However, Reality shows depart from traditional dramatic art in that they do not depend on either catharsis (tragedy) or the restoration of harmony (comedy) for satisfactory conclusions. Instead, they tend to invoke existential reality as, of all things, a *deus ex machina* that rescues them from violating their scheduled time slot.

Unscripted filming using a hidden camera, the rawest form of Reality, offers us the employee urinating into the coffee pot in the back room of the workplace, as in *Busted on the Job*. At its most theatrical—scripted filming with a hidden camera—Reality offers us a person having a two-way conversation with a house plant, as in *Candid Camera*, a show created by reality TV pioneer Allen Funt, who began developing the form on radio during the 1940s with his *Candid Microphone* series.

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The most successful reality series in prime time usually synthesize elements of cinéma vérité, which was conceived of for use in muckraking documentaries, with familiar elements of dramatic genres. In *Cops*, the longest-running of the original FOX shows, vérité meets the old-fashioned TV cop show, a la *Adam-12* or *Starsky and Hutch*. Combining elements of these dramas with documentary realism, a typical *Cops* episode is likely to yield, in the editing room, a catch from its own familiar pool of archetypal perps: shirtless drunken rednecks, defiant drunk drivers, African American teenage boys up to no good, and so on.

In MTV's *The Real World*, street crime is traded for puberty and related identity crises as the "reality" catalysts. Vérité conjugates with soap opera and, again, recognizable characters are key. Studboy, virgin, slutgirl, gay guy, bohemian, and others mix it up emotionally in an overstudied search for self. Public casting calls—no résumés required, no union cards allowed—draw thousands seeking nothing more than an unpaid internship in celebrity. How does a non-actor prepare? By watching Reality and trying on the personality costume that best fits. ABC's *Are You Hot?*, in which people strip down to show all but genitalia to be rated for their degree of physical perfection, uses most of a storyline previously restricted to pornographic videos. It may well mark the last leg of a psychosexual journey in American mass culture that began with the imposition of the Hays Code on Hollywood films in the 1930s.

The starkest reality presented by reality television at its best is a demystification of the medium of television. TV began penetrating American life when crowds first gathered in front of appliance stores to stand and behold the miracle of Milton Berle. Despite its placement in the home, television maintained the Olympian aura of the theater (via cinema), a place where only gods, goddesses, and the extreme cases of humanity could appear. Those days, of course, are gone. Children put tapes into VCRs and fast-forward them when bored, which is often soon, and eject them in favor of others when they lose interest completely. Parents begin taping

their children at the birth moment and keep video tabs of first steps, birthday parties, and everything else until the children's emerging sexual personalities force them to abandon camera. Once they have become too dangerous to appear in parent productions, the children make their own tapes. As in most human endeavors, those who see themselves as extraordinary in some way —in appearance, in performance, in charisma, or in the effective practice of good and/or evil—are ready to move on to the next level. Reality is waiting: *The Bachelor, Road Rules, Survivor, Who Wants to be a Millionaire?, MTV Spring Break Coverage, The Jerry Springer Show.*

The Summer of Reality began in May 2000, with the premiere of *Survivor.* The success of the CBS prime-time series marked the emergence of Reality as a fully fledged network programming phenomenon, worthy of cookie-cutter imitations, late-night spoofs, and public obsession. By its final episode, some 62 million viewers had seen one or more episodes and the "*Survivor* phenomenon" had saturated mass conversation like a number one hit from the 1960s. Broadcast network television had found what it needed: an inexpensive programming form that promised to put it, if only occasionally now, squarely at the center of conversation at the office water cooler, above, beyond, and beneath demographic lines. Imitations followed: *Big Brother, Temptation Island, Fear Factor,* and so on. Many people who watch television are already bored.

The future development of old-fashioned scripted TV drama has fallen to the premium cable services. *Sex in the City* (HBO) dropped the laugh track and reworked the sitcom into a vital, mature—and very funny—comedy of manners. Ironically, broadcast stations across the country are lining up for local syndication rights. Showtime's *Queer as Folk* and HBO's *Six Feet Under* have proved that prime-time soap operas can be written for post-pubescent viewers, and *Carnivale* (HBO) has created a hybrid species of the historical novel, science fiction and religious mysticism that goes begging for a critic willing to take a chance on explaining the plot. As one writer predicted in a 1984 article on the "cable revolution" for *The Atlantic Monthly,* "From now on, if you want good stuff, you're going to have to pay for it."

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