Reality TV Can Motivate Generosity Across America

Reality TV, 2008
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While observers have accused reality TV of pandering to the lowest common denominator, the best of these programs may help motivate America to better the lives of those who need it most. From building homes for needy families to extreme makeovers for individuals, Reality TV shows can improve morale across America and give hope to those in most need for the future.

Brand new Pontiac G6s for an entire audience, many of whom desperately need a car. A reality show that not only builds a family a new house, but mends the problems within, from weight loss to relationships. And in the Catskills of upstate New York, an entire town gets a makeover, giving a community "a new place to call home."

Television, it seems, is showing its softer side.

Tucked amid the back-stabbing and maggot-eating fests like "Survivor" or "Fear Factor" that are the staples of reality TV, comes a bevy of feel-good, life-improving shows determined to leave their targets—or at least appear to leave them—better than they found them.

The rise in Good Samaritan TV is, in part, a backlash against the skullduggery that has made its way into family living rooms in recent years. But it also plays into a powerful market desire for make-over in America. The country is fascinated with both the notion of reinvention and the philanthropic vehicle often used to get there—as was seen by the buzz generated when Oprah Winfrey handed out 276 sets of keys donated by General Motors, a gesture worth some $7 million.

Don't worry, though: Those who still want the manipulation and scheming of shows like "Big Brother" can certainly find it. They can watch participants humiliate themselves in any number of ways.

Indeed, reality TV came of age using a winner-takes-all model, says Toby Miller, director of the Film and Visual Culture program at the University of California in Riverside. Now it is trying to increase its staying power with a jolt of variety.

"This is, in a sense, a slight turn away from the harshness of that Darwinian world that you see exemplified in 'Survivor' or 'Dr. Phil,' toward something a little sweeter or nicer," he says.

Helping Those that Need It Most

Do-good TV, of course, is hardly revolutionary. Makeover shows and programs that lavish unexpected bounty on participants have been around since the beginning of television. In the 1950s, "It Could Be You" reunited audience members with long-lost relatives on air, while "Strike it Rich," the self-proclaimed "quiz show with a heart," took down-on-their-luck contestants who, if unable to answer the questions, could call
the "heart line" and get donations from viewers.

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The format still has a market today. "Home Delivery," a new daytime offering from NBC Universal, bills itself as "part makeover, part talk show, and part reality with heart." Its four hosts travel the country, taking their cameras into peoples' homes and finding ways to "transform" their subjects' lives, usually with a showering of gifts: corrective surgery for a boy born without ears, or new uniforms and tickets to Broadway for a New Haven drill team.

For a new Fox show, "Renovate My Family," producers sought not only families in need of home repair but with serious challenges hindering their psychological progress, like obesity or addiction. And on Sony TV's "Moving In," self-help guru and former 76ers owner Pat Croce parks his Winnebago in peoples' driveway for a day, offering not gifts but advice—every life-affirming, 12-step trick he knows.

Inspiring America

Part of the reason for the onslaught of new "feel good" shows comes from the success of more warm-hearted reality offerings like "Queer Eye for the Straight Guy" and the many home and fashion makeover shows.

"Once a company touches a nerve with the American people and shows the rest of the industry this is what America likes, other networks begin to copy it," says TV historian Fred MacDonald.

But the shows also play into two long-time fascinations for Americans: philanthropy and the remade life. "The United States specializes in the makeover," says Dr. Miller. "The Macy's hatcheck girl who becomes a movie star is part of the grand mythology. What you're seeing now in the makeover shows is a reaching back into the rich lode of that myth."

Reality TV Generosity Too Good to Be True?

Back in the 1950s, "Strike it Rich" ultimately became a problem, says Mr. MacDonald, because so many hard-up people began moving to New York with nothing, hoping for a chance to get on the show.

That's a similar criticism that some find in today's programs as well. Some call it flagrant marketing that takes advantage of the less fortunate. "It's really cheap. It exploits their emotional reactions as they squeal and holler and look like little kids at Christmas," says James Weaver, a professor of communication and psychology at Virginia Tech in Blacksburg.

And he questions the long-term value of such giving. Instead of building a new home for a family, questions Mr. Weaver, wouldn't it be better to teach that same family how to renovate their own home?
For Ed Justus, the mayor of Jeffersonville, the Catskills town of 420 in the midst of transformation, the effects can be lasting. Most of the plans of the Learning Channel in a new series set to air in January called "Town Haul" are top-secret. But Mr. Justus say they are building a teen center, beautifying local businesses, and renovating a building to accommodate a handicapped resident.

"I was gung-ho right from the start," Justus says. "It will put us on the map. I think in years to come people will talk about Jeffersonville."

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Such shows, with hope and change at their foundation, can play better with audiences than makeover shows where fame and fortune alone are the prizes, says Robert Thompson, a media expert at Syracuse University in upstate New York.

Inspiration of Quality Reality TV Gives Hope to the Future

That might be especially true today. While television is often used as an escape, some say terrorism, the war in Iraq, and joblessness make "nice" more appealing. "We are feeling so vulnerable and endangered, so worried about the future, there is a kind of drive to do something good and do it fast," says Faith Popcorn, a marketing trend watcher.

But critics say that salaciousness is likely to remain a staple, at least on prime-time television. Most of the more benign programs can be found on cable networks and during daytime syndication, while the night is still committed to "wheeling and dealing," says Professor Thompson. "The very same audience that might really like a good knockdown dragout fight on 'The Apprentice' he says, also delights in "the dream come true."

After all, reality TV is a form of dramatic art. "Conflict creates drama, and villains create conflict," says Ed Robertson, a pop culture critic in California. "Nice isn't very dramatic. Unless you're Oprah."

Further Readings

Books


**Periodicals**

- Susan Gurevitz "Reality Shows Push the Limits: Which Is Easier—Performing a Stunt on a Reality TV Show or Insuring the Show? Which Would You Rather Do—Eat Maggots to Win $100,000 or Insure a Reality TV Show?" *Risk & Insurance*, September 15, 2004.
- Ron Leon "Reality Television and Third-Person Perception," *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic*
Media, June 1, 2006.


- Linda Bates Parker "'I Hate My Job': A Reality Check on Reality TV Shows," *Black Collegian*, February 1, 2005.


