Is reality TV hurting us?

Seemingly harmless entertainment has surprising effects

BY KATE PARHAM FOR USA TODAY

TURN ON THE TV.
Someone’s getting voted off or kicked out or dumped. There’s likely a catfight or a fistfight in the near future, and a woman is about to cry. It’s reality TV. It’s harmless entertainment, right? Don’t be so sure.

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... SKEWS OUR PERCEPTION OF REALITY
Ask reality TV fans if they think reality shows are real and you’ll likely hear, “Of course not.” Yet they’ll see real people doing real things that were caught on camera and also say, “You can’t make that up.” What these viewers forget is the “real people” were cast for their roles, their lines often scripted, and “incidents edited, decontextualized, and re-organized, ignoring the original chronology of events and put together in a way that tells the particular story the [producers] want to tell, a story that may be quite different from how it was experienced by the people on the show,” says Rachel E. Duhéftsky, assistant professor of communication at the University of South Florida and author of The Surveillance of Women on Reality Television: Watching The Bachelor and The Bachelorette. This kind of manipulative editing is known as Frankenbiting, explains Jennifer L. Pozner, author of Reality Bites Back: The Troubling Truth About Guilty Pleasure TV and executive director of Women In Media & News. “Producers shoot 100 percent of the time with thousands of cameras but only use less than 1 percent of what they’ve shot, highly editing that footage,” she says. “You can make someone look any way you want.” Or as Jeff Bartisch, a freelance reality-show editor, put it when talking with Time magazine, “You can really take something black and make it white.”

... MAKES US SELF-IMPORTANT “CELEBRITIES”
Thanks to reality TV, anyone can be a celebrity, even those without talent, intelligence, or a good work ethic. “People are always looking to their environment for cues on how to behave,” says Michael A. Stefanon, an assistant professor of communication at the University of Buffalo. Stefanon’s recent study of undergraduate students found that heavy viewers of reality programming were more likely to have a large network on Facebook with many “friends” they don’t actually know, spend more time online managing their profile, and share more photos of themselves. “In general, the core message [of reality TV] is that anybody can be a celebrity, and it’s a good thing to be the center of attention because you’ll be rewarded,” says Stefanon. In other words, we hear that the more attention we receive, the more important we are. Facebook provides tools to achieve that goal, he says. Reality TV also “preaches the benefits of self-disclosure and submission to the monitoring gaze,” explains Mark Andrejevic, an associate professor of communication studies at the University of Iowa and author of Reality TV: The Work of Being Watched. “It equates submission to surveillance with participation and self-expression. It celebrates the notion that airing our dirty laundry in public is good for us, because it forces us to confront and perhaps reflect upon our conflicts.” People are mimicking this behavior online, sharing more information about themselves with people they don’t know.

... REINFORCES STEREOTYPES
Reality TV “has taught women that they should aspire to nothing more than a firm ass and firm financial portfolio,”Regarding people of color, she says, the genre either ignores or mocks them. “Research has shown that watching reality TV because it makes them feel better “In general, the core message of reality TV is that anybody can be a celebrity, and it’s a good thing to be the center of attention.”

... DISTORTS OUR MORAL COMPASS
Reality TV has taught us to celebrate the misfortune of others, says Pozner, who has been speaking with students over the last decade to gauge their responses to reality TV. “Now instead of laughing at an obviously manipulative moment in dating like they used to do, students laugh at women who cry.” Even shows like American Idol, which is supposed to be about talent, are actually about much more about humiliation, she says. Many viewers enjoy watching reality TV because it makes them feel better about themselves. In psychology, this is known as “downward comparison—a certain pleasure taken by viewers in seeing themselves as superior to the cast members,” explains Andrejevic. Summing up the effects of reality TV, Pozner says it “creates psychological environments for viewers in which bullying and aggression are rewarded, regressive gender roles are expected and lauded, and…attitudes about race, as well as gender, conform to a pre-civil and women’s rights America.”