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Keeping It Real:  
A Historical Look at Reality TV

Jessica Roberts

Thesis submitted to the  
P.I. Reed School of Journalism  
at West Virginia University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of

Master of Science  
in  
Journalism

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Morgantown, West Virginia  
2011

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## ABSTRACT

### Keeping It Real: A Historical Look at Reality TV

Jessica Roberts

In the summer of 2000 CBS launched a wilderness and competition reality show called “Survivor.” The show became a monster hit with more than fifty million viewers watching the finale, ratings only second to Super Bowl. That summer and that show forever changed many aspects of the television industry. Reality TV had been around for years, but with “Survivor” it began a period of lightening fast development, growth, and influence. During the past decade, many different reality shows have emerged and this research categorizes those shows into four sub-genres that it is argued all reality shows during this time could fit into. Those genres, and the hybrids of them that are still emerging, will play a huge part in how television in the future is created, financed, and produced. In addition, reality TV and all its genres have expanded what is considered acceptable as scripted and unscripted broadcast content in less than 10 years. The implications this has had and will continue to have on the television industry are numerous and important to understand if one is to recognize where television programs are headed in the future. This detailed history gives a much needed glimpse into the people, the programs, and the processes that went into creating one of the most dominant and influential formats of television programming today and in the future.

## DEDICATION

I wish to dedicate this thesis to my mom, the late **Bonnie McKeever Roberts**, who as a school teacher instilled in me at a young age the importance of an education. Through her unconditional love, she taught me some of life's most valuable lessons: right from wrong, do unto others, try your best, it's what's on the inside that counts and have faith. Her amazing strength has inspired me to follow my dreams and her beautiful smile will stay forever young.

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Last, I would like to thank my **friends**, who have become more like family. Thank you for your love and support and for never giving up on me. Our amazing friendship reminds me that life is about the journey, not the destination. Thank you for helping to fill that journey with laughter and countless memories that will last a lifetime.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

In the summer of 2010, millions of viewers tuned in for the series finale of the popular MTV reality show “The Hills.” Most viewers who had followed the characters through their “real lives” for the past six years expected tears and drama from the last episode, but not many predicted what would happen as the credits began to roll. As the camera panned out, viewers saw the crew pushing away a backdrop that made it appear as though Brody Jenner and Kristin Cavallari were saying goodbye in front of the famous Hollywood sign, but it was revealed that the final scene between the characters was filmed on a Hollywood back lot (Vena, 2010). “It’s a nod to how much work goes into making it *feel* like a scripted show,” explained “The Hills” creator Adam DiVello, (Kinon, 2010).

One could argue it also is a nod to how mainstream television has shifted to a new genre of programming over the last decade. That genre is reality, and scripted or non-scripted, it has completely changed the landscape of American TV. This thesis presents a historical study of how reality shows developed, what they did, and how they have attracted devoted audiences for the past 10 years. Understanding the reality genre’s dramatic evolution over the past decade will enhance knowledge and studies of how reality has shaped and influenced television and how creators and marketers distribute programs.

Throughout entertainment history, television has been dominated by varying genres such as news, westerns, sitcoms, games shows, dramas, and soap operas. While each genre had a specific audience, they all provided entertainment to viewers and some sort of conflict and resolution in a short period of time. Television also offered viewers an escape from everyday worries for an hour or so. By 2000, another genre began to take television in a new direction: reality TV. Non-scripted shows like "Cops" and "The Real World" had been around but were



not considered mainstream programming. Although the public and media executives did not realize it, the popularity of this genre was about to explode, changing the way Americans viewed television. In the summer of 2000 CBS launched a wilderness and competition reality show called “Survivor.” The show became a monster hit with more than 50 million viewers watching the finale, ratings only second to Super Bowl XXXIV in January of that same year (Roman, 2005). It also generated an estimated 50 million in advertising for the network during the final three episodes of the first season (Hill, 2005). In less than three months, CBS had created a reality frenzy pushing other networks to develop shows about “real people.” It was obvious this new genre was going to be a game changer. “The genie has finally been let out of the bottle,” said Robert Thompson, director of the Center for the Study of Popular Television at Syracuse University in a *Newsweek* article. “After the summer of 2000, there will never be another day in any of our lives where there won't be some of this kind of programming on television” (Peysner, Sigismund, Smalley, & Gordon, 2000, p. 52).

Reality shows offered an attraction different from shows such as “Friends” that typically topped the ratings on major networks. Mainly they were less expensive to produce. The main reason was they did not include any paid actors demanding huge salaries, because none of the reality show “actors” belonged to the Screen Actors Guild (Mittell, 2010). Reality TV also gave the networks greater control by providing a way to fill the hours around more pricey dramas and sitcoms with cheaper programming and by controlling labor costs (Raphael, 2009). They also helped fill the void during the summer season as networks began competing with cable channels that were beginning to air similar shows all year round.

By 2001 “Big Brother” (July 5, 2000) and the “The Amazing Race” (September 5, 2001) successfully emerged and solidified CBS as the front-runner in the race for reality TV

programming. The other major networks were not far behind. In the summer of 2002, Fox debuted a new musical talent competition called "American Idol" and it became the highest rated show on US TV that year (Dann, 2003). By 2004, reality had proven its staying power. ABC had developed "The Bachelor" (March 25, 2002) and "Extreme Makeover Home Edition" (February 15, 2004). NBC had "The Apprentice" (January 8, 2004) and "The Biggest Loser" (October 19, 2004). Cable channels such as MTV also had their own version of reality with hit shows like "The Osbournes" (March 5, 2002) and "Newlyweds: Nick and Jessica" (August 19, 2003). The reality genre even pushed executives of the annual Primetime Emmy Awards to include new categories for unscripted programming in 2003 (Huff, 2006).

In 2010, a decade after "Survivor" became an overnight success, reality TV continues to dominate the American airwaves in dozens of forms. Reality TV has expanded what is considered acceptable as scripted and unscripted broadcast content in less than 10 years. This has affected the broader legacy of all TV programs and formats, including how comedy sitcoms and scripted drama programs are created, written, and produced. Elements of this can be seen through dialogue, characters, or simply how a comedy or drama is filmed. In just over a decade, we have gotten to the point where reality is, in fact, more scripted, and in turn TV shows are incorporating "real" aspects into scripted story and plotlines. Based on growing Nielson ratings and the intense media coverage these programs have received from all areas of society, reality programming has proven its staying power and influence on the American cultural landscape. This genre no doubt will continue to influence and inform how the television industry works in conjunction with programming, advertising, production and audience retention (Mittell, 2010).

So, how did we get to this point? And more importantly, what does the history of this genre contribute to today's media knowledge? Although mainstream reality TV has been around

for over a decade, research shows that studies on certain aspects are lacking (Nabi, Biely, Morgan, & Stitt, 2003). There have been studies conducted on specific topics like the authenticity of and the addiction to reality TV, but not as many on breaking down the substance, examining if certain shows have common threads that make them work, and providing a potential model for future TV shows of every genre.

This research will present a historical analysis of the evolution of the different types of reality shows over the past 10 years (2000-2010), arguably when these newer forms of reality television came into their heyday on broadcast television. Reality TV has been around for years, but this research argues that earlier reality programming did not have the commercial and broadcast success that began with the premiere of “Survivor” in 2000. After researching and examining primary and secondary sources such as published articles, interviews, and popular reality shows that have debuted over the past ten years, the researcher believes that most reality shows can fit into four self created sub-genres which are Challenge, Talent, Makeover and Celebrity. Furthermore, there are certain characteristics and “grandfather” shows that can define each sub-genre. Three of the four “grandfather” shows were primetime hits on major broadcast networks, setting the reality trend from which other networks, cable providers, and sponsors would profit. The fourth “grandfather” show was the highest rated series on one of the earliest and most groundbreaking cable networks (Kompere, 2009). The research will argue that all past and current reality shows can fit into one of these sub-genres, and that these sub-genres can provide a blueprint for commercial and audience success that future television programs and the media in general could follow. Although this study only examines trends over the past 10 years, its findings could have implications for identifying how the styles, content, and viewer perception of different types of shows reflect the changing television and media markets in the

future. An understanding of these differences and similarities of these sub-genres as the researcher defines them will have an impact on the future of not only reality TV, but different genres and types of programming in general.

## Chapter 2: Background of Television

“The tribe has spoken,” THIS is American Idol,” “Move that bus,” and “That’s Hot.” These catch phrases all have one thing in common: they came from reality television in the past 10 years. Although some say the surprise success of “Survivor” in 2000 was the beginning of modern day reality TV, one could argue there has always been traces of the genre in programs dating back to the 1950s with hidden-camera shows like “Candid Camera” and talent competitions such as “Original Amateur Hour,” which aired on TV for more than 20 years (Brooks & Marsh, 1979). In 1956 NBC premiered a show called “Queen for a Day,” which many critics consider a precursor to the reality television of today (Roman, 2005). The program began on radio in 1945 before moving to television in 1956, and the show was so popular that NBC lengthened the program from 30 to 45 minutes and increased the cost of commercial spots. The program included contestants, prizes, audience participation and judging; all common characteristics found in most current reality programs (Roman, 2005). Characteristics of the current reality genre can also be seen in the entertainment, competition and drama found in many long-running programs created in the 1950s such as “Truth or Consequences,” (1950-1988), “American Bandstand,” (1952-1989) and “The Guiding Light,” (1952-2009).

By 1960 nearly 90 percent of all American households owned a television set, as programming continued to evolve and develop (Sterling & Kittross, 2003). New television genres were constantly being created or popular programming concepts that had proven successful in the past were being recycled and reality continued to come to viewers in many guises and formats (Roman, 2005). The comedy/talk show genre also began to develop with shows such as “The Tonight Show” and “The Mike Douglas Show.”

As television gained momentum in the 1970s, PBS aired a documentary series “An American Family” in 1973, which some argue was the first reality television show centered on an actual authentic family (Kompare, 2009). Similarly, King (2006) suggests that reality programming stemmed from other genres such as game shows and talk shows of the 1970s and 1980s. Aside from the hosts, both genres featured real people as contestants and guests. In addition, traces of modern day reality TV can also be traced to 1976, when ABC began airing a sports competition program called “Battle of the Network Stars,” which featured teams of celebrities from ABC, CBS and NBC competing against one another in physical challenges (Milliman, 2003). Famous sports broadcaster at the time Howard Cosell served as commentator of the events, which included a swimming race between TV beauties Farrah Fawcett and Lynda Carter (Lidz, 2001). “Battle of the Network Stars” would continue to air every six months for the next 12 years.

Towards the end of the 1970s situation comedies also continued to dominate the airwaves. However, family sitcoms such as “The Brady Bunch” and “The Partridge Family” were giving way to edgier, more socially conscious TV programs such as “All in the Family” and “Good Times,” which helped pave the way for the expanding programming market. In the 1980s, the situation comedy genre continued its popularity with shows such as “Family Ties” and “The Cosby Show.” But one also can argue that certain TV shows created in that decade served as precedents to the modern day reality genre. In 1981, NBC produced a special called “TV’s Censored Bloopers,” devoted to unrehearsed outtakes and humorous moments from film and television. The success of the show proved there was an audience for unscripted television moments and NBC created a series “TV’s Bloopers and Practical Jokes,” hosted by Dick Clark and Ed McMahon (Roman, 2005). In May 1983 the unscripted trend continued with the premiere

of a new talent competition called “Star Search.” Contestants from all over the country competed in different categories such as singing, dancing, modeling and comedy (“Searching for Stars,” 1985). In a 2007 interview “Star Search” creator Al Masini said he believed there was an audience for talent shows, similar to “Original Amateur Hour” and that these types of shows would always do well because the audience would want to see people like themselves become successful (Magee, 2008).

By the late 1980s, budget cuts along with The Writers Guild of America labor strike of 1988 pushed the networks into finding lower budget, unscripted programming such as Fox’s “Cops” and “America’s Most Wanted,” shows which according to the network’s executives were an early example of reality TV (Berman & Wheat, 2003). The rise of tabloid journalism and documentary television, such as “A Current Affair” and “Hard Copy” combined with network, cable and satellite channels all competing for viewership, helped to pave the way for reality TV in the 1990s (Hill, 2005).

In 1992, documentary filmmaker Jon Murray and his production partner Mary-Ellis Bunim created “The Real World” on MTV. Originally the network wanted a scripted soap opera starring young people, but backed out at the last minute because the production cost was too high. Murray and Bunim then suggested an unscripted format, using real people instead of actors (Huff, 2006). According to Murray, his inspiration was to remake “An American Family” for the MTV generation (Andrejevic, 2004). Mittell (2010) argued “The Real World” was the first successful reality program that offered continuing characters and storylines, geared towards a younger viewing audience. By casting young diverse adults in a manner intended to ignite conflict and placing them in a house filled with cameras and microphones, the producers created a TV format that would set the stage for mainstream reality TV including shows such as “Big

Brother” (Kraszewski, 2009). By the third season, “The Real World” was gaining popularity and credibility partially due to the national attention the show was receiving for tackling difficult subject matter such as racism, sexual orientation and AIDS. With every new season came a new cast, a new location and a new set of issues. Spinoff shows like “Road Rules” and “Real World/Road Rules Challenge” followed in the later 1990s, and the success of the franchise was instrumental in building MTV’s brand outside of music videos (Castleman & Podrazik, 2003). The narrative format and competition aspect of these shows also set the stage for the expansion of bigger budget reality shows on major networks into the new millennium as reflected in a statement by producer Judd Apatow to *Time*, “The Real World wouldn’t have made it on CBS, but it spawned Survivor” (Poniewozik, Berestein, & Nugent, 2002, p. 64).

As the 1990s rolled to a close, things were beginning to change. The media frenzy that surrounded true events such as the Monica Lewinsky scandal and the O.J Simpson trial seemed to further justify the public’s fascination with reality as a form of entertainment. Starting in the summer of 1999, the success of the American version of the British import “Who Wants to be a Millionaire?” airing in ABC prime time seemed to validate the potential for both gambling with unscripted programming and importing foreign shows (Castleman & Podrazik, 2003).

“Millionaire” became an instant hit during the summer season, which is mostly known for reruns, and its format became a possible model for reality TV to succeed in network primetime. Producers could import the concept of a foreign TV show, but change it by using an American host, guests, etc, as evidenced when ABC hired well-known TV personality Regis Philbin to host “Who Wants to be a Millionaire?.” The commercial success of the show resulted in its adaptation in over 100 countries, and made programmers take a new look at not only the value of



Americanizing European shows, but also the possibility of reality programming in primetime (Keveney, 2003b).

In an attempt to duplicate ABC's success, Fox launched its own version of a millionaire reality show called "Who Wants to Marry a Multi-Millionaire" in February of 2000. This two-hour show revolved around 50 women competing for a wealthy unknown bachelor named Rick Rockwell, agreeing if picked to marry him on the spot (Huff, 2006). Rockwell chose a nurse named Darva Conger, who received over \$100,000 in prizes including an engagement ring. But not long after the wedding, trouble emerged in allegations that Rockwell had a restraining order against him from a former girlfriend and that he had lied about other parts of his life (Simon, 2005). Conger filed for an annulment after the honeymoon, and Fox took a lot of heat for possibly putting contestants in danger. The controversy caused the network to back off the reality genre, at least for a time (Huff, 2006).

But even with "The Real World" having a handful of seasons under its belt in the late 1990s, the reality genre still seemed so irrelevant to an adult viewing audience that Mark Burnett's concept of "Survivor" was at first rejected by CBS. He also pitched it to ABC, NBC, Fox, USA, and the Discovery channel, all of which also rejected the idea (Huff, 2006). A British version of the show had some success in Europe, but U.S critics and network executives were still skeptical. Research showed that the American television industry had been cautious about importing TV shows or formats from other countries, fearing their own audience would not accept them in part because of the cultural differences. The industry leaned more towards creating American versions of foreign TV shows such as the 1970s comedies "All in the Family" and "Three's Company," both adaptations of British sitcoms (Mittell, 2010).

## **Thesis Overview: Reality comes to primetime network television**

Despite the reality trouble that had plagued Fox, Mark Burnett finally got a network to take another look at “Survivor.” Eventually Leslie Moonves, the head of CBS, gave “Survivor” the green light and it premiered in the summer of 2000 (Huff, 2006). The show was based on the European game called “Expedition Robinson” where contestants were isolated on an undeveloped island where they competed in challenges while trying to avoid being voted off by fellow contestants in a fight for the million dollar prize (Farhi & de Moraes, 2000). The American version followed the same concept, and viewers soon realized that “Survivor” was as much a mental game as it was physical. “Alliances” were formed and quickly broken as the effort to “outwit, outlast and outplay” became each contestant’s main goal. Ratings for the surprise hit soared, and over its eight week run “Survivor” became a must see show, with over 50 million viewers watching the final episode (Magder, 2009). The format clicked with all ages, including the young adult demographic (ages 18 to 49) CBS was trying to attract, making it the most watched summertime program since 1987, when Nielson first started using electronic meters to measure ratings (Andrejevic, 2004). CBS also found success the same summer with “Big Brother,” another reality show that had multiple versions airing around Europe. The format of this program was similar to “The Real World” where a cast of diverse strangers lived together and had their lives taped but unlike the MTV show, the “Big Brother” format incorporated audience participation, letting viewers vote out roommates until one winner remained (Castleman & Podrazik, 2003). The 2000 finale of “Big Brother” attracted almost 50 million viewers and was renewed for a second season (Biressi & Nunn, 2005). The show was also one of the first to integrate audience participation and voting, a trend that would continue throughout the development of reality TV on American television screens (Mittell, 2010).

CBS's overwhelming success with these two shows in every demographic combined with the low cost production rate had the other major networks scrambling to develop their own reality shows, many of which also were imports or adaptations of European shows. In an effort to copy the success of "Survivor," NBC launched "Fear Factor" in the summer of 2001 where contestants competed in over the top wild stunts for cash and prizes. In September of that same year, CBS struck reality gold again with "The Amazing Race," a show where couples or pairs competed in stunts in a race around the world. The show earned an Emmy Award for Outstanding Reality-Competition in its first season (Grazian, 2010). In January of 2002, ABC found its answer to reality with "The Bachelor" and "Extreme Makeover," bringing romance, beauty and self-help to the now growing list of reality TV shows. Continuing the reality trend, Fox launched "American Idol" in June of 2002, yet another copy of a British program called "Pop Idol" created by Simon Fuller. Between the judges' banter, the contestants singing talent, and the audience participation, the show took off and by the second season, ranked as one of the top five highest rated shows on network television (Sanneh, 2005). "American Idol" was one of the early examples of transforming "ordinary" reality contestants into celebrities.

Cable networks were also finding success with reality shows. In 2000, TLC premiered a how-to show called "Trading Spaces," which was another adaptation of a British show called "Changing Rooms" (Mittell, 2010). In 2002 "The Osbournes" debuted on MTV while E! Entertainment Television premiered "The Anna Nicole Show." In 2003 Tyra Banks launched "America's Next Top Model" on UPN and the same year Bravo debuted "Queer Eye for the Straight Guy," which won an Emmy Award for Outstanding Reality Program in 2004 (Lagorio, 2005).

A major sign of reality success came in the mid 2000s when the number of scripted sitcoms and dramas on network television began to decline and reality shows were taking over their time slots (Huff, 2006). By the 2004 television season there were dozens of successful reality shows on network and cable TV. NBC had “The Biggest Loser” and “The Apprentice.” ABC continued the success of “Extreme Makeover” and “The Bachelor” with spin-offs “Extreme Makeover: Home Edition” and “The Bachelorette” respectively. CBS was still going strong with “Survivor,” “Big Brother” and “The Amazing Race” and Fox consistently dominated the ratings with “American Idol.” The powerhouse talent show was drawing in over 24 million viewers each week, making it at the time the most watched show in the history of television (Jenkins, 2009).

It was also around this midway point of the decade that the “real” in the term “reality” was starting to be called into question. Like most new projects, the origins of reality TV seemed to be authentic, but producers quickly figured out that drama pulled in the viewers. Thus an effort began to promote and create more dramatic moments in reality programs, in part by looking for contestants that would stir up controversy. An early example of this type casting was reflected on NBC’s “The Apprentice.” As contestants competed in various business tasks to win a job working for media mogul Donald Trump, one woman stood out early not just for her education and boardroom skills, but for her argumentative nature. Contestant Omarosa’s fiery temper portrayed her as the villain each episode, but helped turn her into a household name. Turning contestants into “characters” was quickly becoming part of a successful reality show format. The genre seemed to follow in the footsteps of successful genres such as sitcoms and dramas when it came to character development by reinforcing typical stereotypes. “The angry black woman,” “the dumb blonde” and “the dumb jock” characters that emerged from reality

shows suggested that stereotyping, as well as plot and character development had become an important aspect of a successful TV show regardless of the genre.

### **Advertising & product placement**

Another gimmick that advertisers and producers began to capitalize on during these years was the use of product placement. The film industry had found success with the concept throughout the 1980s with some memorable moments such as in the blockbuster hit *ET: the Extra - Terrestrial*. After the alien was shown eating Reese's Pieces in the movie, sales of the candy shot up by over 60 percent (Reed, 1989). Within two months more than 800 cinemas that did not sell the candy at their concession stands were now carrying the product (Segrave, 2004). Product placement in films continued successfully in the 1990s in films such as *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* and *Wayne's World*. Whether it was cartoon turtles shown eating Domino's Pizza or Mike Myers as Wayne Campbell refusing to "not bow to any sponsor" while holding a Pepsi can and a Pizza Hut box, executives were cashing in on the concept (Segrave, 2004). But despite film success, research showed that interactive television was experimented with and was considered a failure. Studies showed that viewers just wanted to sit back and enjoy their TV show, not be bombarded with ads for products during them (Jenkins, 2009).

But the mainstream success of reality television proved there was an audience that would not only watch the show, but that would use multimedia to connect with it. While fictional shows were using brand names as props, reality shows like "Survivor" and "American Idol" made the products center stage. "Survivor" contestants could be seen fighting for a bag of Doritos and "Idol" singers were staring in Ford commercials while the judges drank from Coca-Cola glasses

(Kaufman, 2004). In 2004, product placement costs increased by 84 percent and amounted to over 500 million in revenue for broadcasters, networks, and cable channels (Hearn, 2009).

Reality programs also seemed to provide the perfect formula for audience integration and participation. AT&T partnered up with "American Idol" and allowed viewers to use multimedia to vote for their favorite contestant by sending a text message on an AT&T phone. By the end of the second season in May 2003, Fox was receiving over 20 million calls or texts per episode. Phone companies were also happy about this because texting had not yet taken off in America like it had in Europe and Asia (Jenkins, 2009). The success of the AT&T partnership led to similar contracts with other reality shows such as "Dancing with the Stars." The growth in product integration and audience interaction may have been foreseen three years before, when "Survivor" executive producer Mark Burnett told *Esquire* magazine, "'Survivor' is as much a marketing vehicle as it is a television show. My shows create an interest, and people will look at them, but the endgame here is selling products in stores: a car, deodorant, running shoes; It's the future of television" (Hearn, 2009, p. 168). Burnett's words were proven prophetic by 2007, when the top 10 primetime network shows with the most brand occurrences belonged to reality shows, with "American Idol" leading the way with over four thousand (Hall, 2008).

### **Reality & the four sub-genres**

Throughout the decade the reality craze continued both in content and advertising, with many producers and networks copying these successful formulas. There were also reality shows that took a basic concept and put a spin on it, such as Fox's "Joe Millionaire." It was the basic dating concept with a twist: all the women were led to believe they were competing for a millionaire, when in fact he was a blue collar construction worker (Catleman & Podrazik, 2003).

“In a way, we’re ripping off the mask of the people [who sign up for shows like “The Bachelor”],” Fox reality programming executive Mike Darnell told *Daily Variety* in 2002. “We find out whether they’re really doing this for love” (Huff, 2006, pg. 82). In February 2003 40 million viewers tuned in for the finale of “Joe Millionaire,” helping the Fox network win its first sweeps period in its 16-year history (Roman, 2005). Throughout the rest of the decade reality writers and producers competed to keep their shows fresh, new and entertaining. Dramatic twists, new locations, clever editing, more money and extravagant prizes kept devoted audiences faithfully tuning in season after season.

As this background chapter has suggested, the reality genre has and continues to influence modern day television. In order to fully understand the impact of the genre, it is important to examine in depth the different categories that the reality television genre has spawned over the past decade. The researcher believes that most reality shows can fit into four self created sub-genres and that there are certain characteristics and “grandfather” shows that can define each one. The four self created sub-genres are as followed: Challenge, Talent, Makeover and Celebrity. For the next four chapters each sub-genre will be defined and discussed in depth, including which reality show is considered the “grandfather” of each category. Examining more thoroughly the history and significance of each sub-genre will provide a deeper understanding of the changing television and media markets today and in the future.

## **Conclusion**

Before 2000 there were only a handful of reality shows in America, now there are hundreds with more on the way. By looking at how these shows survived and thrived, one can see the methods and tactics employed by the creators that are visible in different programs airing

today, including comedies and dramas that use similar camera work and shooting styles made popular by reality programs. That is one reason why the creation and historical examination of the four sub-genres and what they do and can do for producers and the audience is important to study. Understanding the history of these programs and the methods they use to become successful provide needed information that can be studied more in-depth in future examinations of television programming and success.



### **Chapter 3: Challenge**

An Ivy League graduate pretending a coconut is a cell phone; people eating rats in the middle of the jungle; and a man stripping naked in honor of his birthday. Those were just a few images on the CBS reality show hit “Survivor” that drew in around 25 million TV viewers every Wednesday in the summer of 2000 (Rothstein, 2000). The show revolved around mental and physical competitions among “real people” to win cash and prizes—a style of reality show that is one of the most popular to this day and continues to draw heavy audiences. “Survivor” helped define the TV reality genre in general and was the catalyst for numerous competition reality shows that permeate the airwaves today. Challenge type games and shows are some of the most popular reality programs out there, many building upon the style and theme to become more outrageous each season. Thus they become the focus of the first reality sub-genre as defined by the researcher: the challenge category.

The main characteristic of the challenge sub-genre is competition. The style and format of a challenge reality show encompasses physical and mental strength and can be described as survival of the fittest. A challenge can be defined as a call to engage in any contest, be it skill or strength. Frequently in a challenge someone is called to battle an obstacle or the challenge demands justification. A challenge can also be defined as a difficult job or a task that is stimulating to the one who engages in it or any activity that can be turned into labor, combining both the physical and mental aspects of a challenge (Hendershot, 2009).

Based on these characteristics, CBS’s “Survivor” can be considered the “grandfather” of the challenge category as it was the first extremely popular reality show of this type to air on a broadcast network and it best illustrates both the physical and mental aspects of this sub-genre. It also set the stage in 2000 for the decade of reality to come, as the finale of “Survivor” earned

CBS its highest ratings since the skating finals between Nancy Kerrigan and Tonya Harding at the 1994 Winter Olympics (Castleman & Podrazik, 2003).

### **“Survivor”: The Beginning**

“Survivor” premiered on May 31, 2000, and combined mental tests, sports competitions and a soap opera like drama, all wrapped together in a “Gilligan’s Island” type setting (Farhi & de Moraes, 2000). “Survivor” selected a diverse cast of ordinary people ranging in age, race, ethnicity and religion. Cut off from any outside contact, 16 contestants lived on the remote South Seas island of Palau Tiga while competing against one another in tribal groups in order to become the last person standing through a system of eliminations where tribe members voted one member off (Castleman & Podrazik, 2003). The audience grew each week as the show created “water cooler”-talk everywhere from college campuses to offices across America (Huff, 2006). By the third episode, the show was being watched by 25 million people, which was 1.3 million more viewers than the other five major networks combined (Farhi & Moraes, 2000).

The two hour season finale aired on August 23, 2000 and came down to four very diverse contestants: 39-year-old corporate trainer and openly gay Richard Hatch; 22-year-old river guide Kelly Wiglesworth; 38-year-old blunt truck driver Susan Hawk; and 72-year-old ex-Navy Seal Rudy Boesch . As the final four were narrowed down to Hatch and Wiglesworth, the 14 castmates voted off returned to serve as the jury in the final tribal council to determine the winner. In a now infamous reality show speech, Hawk turned on one-time friend Wiglesworth and urged jurors to vote “for the snake to eat the rat” (*Entertainment Weekly*, 2000). Hatch’s confident speech from episode one (“I’ve got the million-dollar check written already-I’m the winner”) proved true as more than 50 million viewers witnessed “the snake” Richard Hatch

become the last castaway on the island and win the million dollar grand prize (Lipton, Weinstein, Longley, Stambler, & Newton, 2000, p. 87). Despite often being portrayed as the villain who enjoyed walking around in the nude, Hatch told *Newsweek* magazine in August 2000 that he had no regrets about how he played the game. "I'm not sorry trying to build an alliance. I'm not sorry for blatantly lying to Jeff at the tribal councils-I'm happy with the way I played" (Peyser, Sigismund, Smalley, & Gordon, 2000, p. 52). He also offered no apologies for his nudity on national television. "I'm often nude, and I was in the middle of the South China Sea in 110-degree weather. Why would I have clothes on?" (Peyser et al., 2000, p. 52). But as television casting director Lisa Miller-Katz pointed out, Hatch's persona was the perfect fit for television, regardless of the genre. "He's like the Heather Locklear on "Melrose Place," he's the villain you love to hate, he's a casting dream" (Carter, 2000a, p. 1). Good casting of real people, who at the time were not well-known or famous, along with clever marketing and simply good timing, helped make "Survivor" the highest-rated summer series in TV history at the time (Flint, 2000). The high ratings and more diverse audience lasting for 10 years strongly suggest that this show set the standard for reality TV. As a result, half a dozen new reality shows alone premiered in the 2000-2001 television season with just as many in development (Campbell, 2000).

Of course, "Survivor" wrapped up taping four months before the season finale aired, giving producers, writers and editors plenty of time to develop storylines with twists and turns in order to keep the audience intrigued and constantly guessing. "It's a window into human nature and what people consider important for their survival," 22-year-old viewer Monica Wuebbing explained to *The Washington Post* in June 2000. "You root for people based on identifying with certain characteristics" (Farhi & de Moraes, 2000, p. A01). Columbus radio morning show producer Dave Muller had similar thoughts. "You get to know these characters, and you watch

them start fighting or become friends. It has a lot of intrigue and depth” (Saxe & Silberman, 2000, p. 89).

However not everyone was convinced of the longevity of reality shows such as “Survivor.” In a letter to the Editor of *The New York Times*, Joseph Petta of New York wrote: “How much of the survivors' behavior was influenced by the presence of the camera? We can never be absolutely certain that something, or someone, will behave the same as when not being observed” (‘Survivor,’ and Our Lives Today, 2000, p. 12). Some critics shared similar thoughts comparing the success of “Survivor” to TV shows such as “Real People,” “That’s Incredible” and “Those Amazing Animals” in the late seventies and early eighties as reflected in an August 2000 *Rolling Stones* article: “The reality fad will probably fizzle as fast as it did twenty years ago: People watch TV to see stars” (Fantasy Island, 2000, p. 36). At that point in time, it was yet to be seen if the reality genre would become a permanent fixture in the landscape of television, but regardless if someone was a fan or a critic, no one could dispute the impact “Survivor” had on the television industry. “I’ve been doing this for seven years, and I can’t think of anything that took over the nation like this,” said Tampa radio station WFLZ marketing director Shannon Wray (Saxe & Silberman, 2000, p. 89). CBS executives were quick to acknowledge the network’s good fortune and success of the show. “These are numbers like we’ve never seen before at CBS,” Les Moonves, President of CBS stated in June 2000. “This show has done beyond our wildest dreams” (Consoli, 2000, p. 8). Powerful words considering that Moonves turned down the concept of “Survivor” at least twice before finally signing on board, but scheduling the show in the low-risk summer season, a time in which traditionally TV viewing was at its lowest (Farhi & de Moraes, 2000). “Summer used to be a quiet time (to launch new reality shows), but not anymore,” stated Andrea Wong, ABC head of alternative programming

(Adalian, 2003). The overwhelming success of “Survivor,” especially in the coveted 18 to 49 age demographic, was pleasing to other networks trying to break into the reality trend.

### **“Survivor:” A challenge reality show**

The motto of “Survivor:” ‘Outwit, Outlast and Outplay’ seemed to set the tone for the challenge sub-genre. Those words implied a battle to the very end, and one could argue established the way challenge reality shows would continue throughout the decade. Viewers watched as contestants competed in physical challenges, ate bugs, slept in the wilderness and formed alliances. Because of the unprecedented high summer ratings, “Survivor” had a huge impact on the entertainment media as well as hard news establishments. In August 2000, the cover of *Newsweek* read: "Secrets of 'Survivor:' The Final Four Talk about Life on Cutthroat Island." Suddenly which castaway was voted off "Survivor" each week was making headline news. Ratings also shot up on CBS's “The Early Show” the morning after the broadcast when the voted off contestant would be interviewed (Peysner, et al., 2000, p. 52). Radio stations around the country also cashed in on the “Survivor” craze, conducting promotions and contests themed around the reality show. WZEE, a top 40 station in Madison, WI challenged four people to live in a fenced-off area in front of its studios for four days with only water and Spam to eat, while they competed for basic everyday items such as toothpaste. Station promotions director Diane Oleson explained the contest was an opportunity for fans who believed they could mimic their favorite “Survivor” characters “to put their money where their mouth is” (Saxe & Silberman, 2000, p. 89).

The constant media attention and strong ratings served as proof that “Survivor” was the first network mainstream reality show. Its success sparked the creation of other similar challenge

reality shows in the fall of 2000 such as NBC's "Chains of Love," where a contestant was shackled to four possible dates and ABC's "The Mole," where the goal was for a team to discover the traitor among them. Adding to the growing list of challenge reality shows in 2001 were CBS's "The Amazing Race" where pairs competed in a race around the world, and Fox's "Boot Camp," where former drill sergeants put civilians through their routines (Peysner et al., 2000). Both of these shows dealt with ordinary people competing for money and prizes in various physical and mental competitions which were characteristics of the challenge sub-genre. Fox even went so far as to hire Scott Messick, one of the producers of "Survivor," as the executive producer of "Boot Camp" (Pellegrini, 2001). Ironically the show's challenge format seemed too similar to "Survivor" and as a result CBS sued the Fox network in April 2001 for copyright infringement and similarities including the use of landscape and wildlife shots shown on "Boot Camp" (Pellegrini, 2001). In a similar suit in 2000, the Fox-owned Family Channel sued CBS for allegedly stealing the idea for "The Amazing Race" (Freeman, 2001). The lawsuits were an example of how competitive the networks had become in the quest to develop new challenge reality shows in an attempt to capture the commercial success of "Survivor."

But not everyone in the television industry was thrilled about the mainstream success of reality shows such as "Survivor." In the aftermath of the genre's popularity, many feared reality shows would take work away from actual actors and writers. "Reality shows are limiting the amount of shelf space for half-hour comedies," stated sitcom writer and executive producer Tim O'Donnell in an August 2000 interview to the *Christian Science Monitor* (Brody, 2004, p. 122). Some experts in the field expressed the same cautious attitude, believing that "Survivor" could be just a one hit wonder. "With reality programming the question becomes, how much of it can the audience take? The answer may be that "Survivor" is about it," said Garth Jowett, a pop

culture expert at the University of Houston (Campbell, 2000, p. 1). But executives at the major networks were putting their money on the reality trend finding continued success. The head of Fox specials and alternative programming Mike Darnell defended the reality genre when he stated in *The Christian Monitor*, “What would you rather be watching “Survivor,” or the 15th mediocre comedy about the same subject? It all has to do with the quality of the work, and networks are discovering that the American audience really just wants to be entertained” (Campbell, 2000, p. 1).

Due to the overwhelming success of the first season of “Survivor,” CBS executives wasted no time on starting production on “Survivor 2: The Australian Outback.” But the pressure was on executive producer Mark Burnett as some critics questioned whether the sequel could create the same magic as the original. “The most fun thing about this was having people figure out how in the world to play the game,” said Robert Thompson, director of the Center for the Study of Popular Television at Syracuse University. “In ‘Survivor 2’ every single person will be going into the outback with a Ph.D. level knowledge of the history of Survivor; the innocence has been completely lost” (Peyser et al., 2000, p. 52).

Despite some doubtful critics, CBS charged full steam ahead, planning to debut the new season on Sunday January 28, 2001 in a highly coveted time slot following the Super Bowl, which was also on the network that year. “I’m sure that’s going to be the most profitable night in the history of television,” predicted network president Leslie Moonves in August 2000 to *The New York Times* (Carter, 2000b, p. 1). Moonves’s words proved true as over 43 million viewers tuned in for the season premiere of “Survivor 2: The Australian Outback.” CBS executives hoped the high ratings would continue as Moonves boldly scheduled the remainder of the second season to air on Thursdays at 8pm against NBC’s hugely popular “Friends” (Magder, 2004). The

NBC “Must See TV” Thursday night line-up dominated the ratings throughout the 1980s and early 1990s with successful shows like “Cheers,” “The Cosby Show” and “Seinfeld.” The bold move paid off when “Survivor” beat “Friends” and doubled its ratings at the end of the 2001 season (Magder, 2004).

The high ratings for shows with similar formats as “Survivor” such as ABC’s “The Mole” and Fox’s “Temptation Island” seemed to reinforce the belief of network executives that the reality genre, especially challenge type shows, would soon become a more permanent part of prime time programming. “Maybe in five years we’ll see fewer reality shows in number, but they are never going away,” predicted Syracuse University director of the Center for the Study of Popular Television Robert Thompson. “They have joined police shows and sitcoms as a permanent TV genre” (Reisner, 2009, p. 1.). While other major network executives agreed that reality had made a major impact, many felt that scripted comedies and dramas would still provide the backbone of television programming. “CBS was able to turn on the lights on Thursday night,” said Jeff Zucker, President of NBC Entertainment. “Survivor is the real thing. But ‘Must See TV’ on NBC survived (Carter, 2001b, p. 1). But the high ratings of reality shows, particularly among the young viewing audience, seemed to push the relevancy of the reality genre even more. “Young people think the shows being produced in the old formats feel stale,” co-chairman of ABC Entertainment Lloyd Braun said to *The New York Times*. “So when there’s a new format there’s a certain energy, a vibrancy to it that’s attractive to people” (Carter, 2001b, p. 1).

Furthering the reality trend and the challenge sub-genre was the fear by television insiders that a media industry strike would shut down production of scripted television and movies in the fall of 2001 when contracts between the studios, writers and actor unions were set



to expire. Although the unions eventually agreed to new contracts, the networks had already approved a variety of reality shows in order to avoid a possible strike by actors and writers (Castleman & Podrazik, 2003). Mark Burnett was a major contributor to many of the newly approved shows, continuing his television success by producing three other “challenge” shows. “Eco-Challenge” was an event that consisted of teams of athletes racing non stop in events such as mountain biking, horseback riding and scuba diving. The first “Eco-Challenge” was in 1995 and held every year until 2002. Although each race was broadcast on different cable networks each year, it was in 2000 after “Survivor” that the USA Network agreed to a three year contract to air the program and the show’s budget was expanded (Carter, 2001a). Later that year the show was nominated for a Primetime Emmy Award. Burnett’s second show “Combat Missions” was a one hour long reality show hosted by former “Survivor” contestant Rudy Boesch. The show aired also aired on the USA network starting on January 16, 2002 and focused on teams of military soldiers and police officers competing in physical challenges and different types of mission scenarios (Deggans, 2002). Despite Burnett’s confidence that “Combat Missions” would be viewed as a pro-military, patriotic show that would play off the current atmosphere of the Iraq War that Americans were engaged in, it only lasted 14 episodes and was not renewed for a second season (Rogers, 2006). The third show called “Destination Mir,” was an astronaut training competition in conjunction with Amsterdam-based MirCorp. NBC won the multi-million dollar bidding war to air Burnett’s space odyssey show, which had high expectations from the network. “We can’t wait to begin on this project, which will literally be out of this world,” stated president of NBC Entertainment Garth Ancier to MSNBC in 2000. “With “Survivor’s” producer Mark Burnett’s guidance, we believe it has unlimited potential and will take this type of reality programming to the next level” (Boyle, 2000, p 1). But after years of

trying to launch “Destination Mir,” the reality show never made it to the American airwaves. With the failures of both “Combat Missions” and “Destination Mir,” it was becoming apparent that not every reality show was an automatic grand slam, even with “Survivor” heavy weight Burnett’s name on it, as his own words seemed to ring true. “Because of “Survivor’s” success, people thought they could throw anything on the air and get ratings,” Burnett stated to a Florida newspaper in 2002. “They were wrong” (Deggans, 2002, p.1D).

### **Lawsuits & low points**

Despite some failed reality programming, in general the genre continued to thrive with challenge based shows leading the way. But the success did not come without obstacles to overcome, several of which involved lawsuits filed against “Survivor” in 2001. Former season one contestant Stacey Stillman filed a lawsuit on February 5th accusing producer Mark Burnett of manipulating certain contestants to affect the outcome of the show (Shales, 2001b). Fellow contestants such as Dirk Been backed up Stillman’s claim by telling *ElectricMedia* that the show’s production staff influenced the flow of the game, a claim that Burnett strongly denied. “At no point during the production of “Survivor” did I or any other producer, staff member or crew member ever direct any of the participants to vote for or against a particular participant, or attempt to manipulate, coerce, induce, intimidate or influence the participants’ voting” (Shales, 2001b p. 4).

Burnett fired back with a countersuit that charged Stillman with trying to extort money from CBS (The Smoking Gun, 2001). Adding fuel to the fire was investigative reporter Peter Lance’s book *The Stingray* in which the author challenged the authenticity of “Survivor” while attacking Burnett’s credibility (Bloomberg, 2002). Stillman’s case was eventually settled out of

court, but reality show contestants were not the only ones filing suit in the early days of the television genre.

That early lawsuit seemed to reflect a controversial debate among some TV critics and viewers questioning whether reality programming was completely “real,” or partially scripted. Freelance reality show editor Jeff Bartsch told *Time* magazine that there were various ways of editing footage to help develop a storyline. “You really can take something black and make it white” (Poniewozik & McDowell, 2006, p. 60). Similarly MTV reality show producer Tony DiSanto admitted that while editing did play a factor in reality television, it could not create something out of nothing. “Anytime you take something into the editing room, you are enhancing it and editorializing, but we never make up something that hasn’t happened” (Poniewozik & McDowell, 2006, p. 61). Either way it seemed that viewers preferred entertainment over authenticity as reflected in a *Time* poll when a study found that more than half of the respondents said that accuracy was not a factor in their enjoyment of reality TV (Poniewozik & McDowell, 2006).

The scripted/unscripted debate of reality television did not seem to overshadow the enormous popularity of the genre, as CBS announced plans that “Survivor: Africa,” the show’s third edition would begin airing in October of 2001. The network would have time to sell the show in advance for the fall premiere, a process known as the up-front season. According to *Advertising Age*’s annual primetime network pricing survey, a 30-second ad for “Survivor: Africa” was expected to cost nearly half a million dollars, and for the first time in history, a reality show was the most expensive regularly scheduled TV program to advertise on (Friedman, 2001). But as the fall season approached, no one in the industry could foresee the tragic events of September 11th, or its implications on the television industry.

## September 11, 2001

The terrorism attacks in New York City and Washington, D.C. on September 11, 2001 were unlike anything the country had ever experienced. The situation resulted in unprecedented history making commercial free and non-stop television coverage for 72 hours after the attack, costing the networks an estimated 100 million per day in lost advertising (Castleman & Podrazik, 2003). Adding to the revenue loss was the delay of the 2001 fall television season. Two days after the attacks, NBC was the first major network to decide on when to begin airing their new fall shows by pushing back the premieres one week until September 24th. "Given what happened, it's the appropriate thing to do," NBC president Jeff Zucker told *USA Today* (Levin, 2001). Executives at the other major networks, ABC, CBS and Fox were still undecided on when to resume a regular TV schedule. CBS Television President Leslie Moonves stated to the media that while the network was weighing the pros and cons, he did expect normalcy to the TV schedule in the near future. "There comes a certain point where you do have to look at moving on; at the moment things are minute by minute and subject to change" (Bowen, 2001, p 1).

When the television industry did begin to slowly work its way back to a normal schedule in late September, the terrorist attacks made some critics speculate about the reality genre and its relevancy in the post 9-11 world. "The whole reality TV thing was sparked by the desire of average people to become celebrities overnight," author Peter Lance commented to the *St. Petersburg Times*. "But why watch middle class Americans retching over eating bugs when people are dying in the streets of New York" (Deggans, 2002, p 1D). Others agreed and felt that the atmosphere of the country after September 11th did not fit with the concept of reality television. "What people want in their prime time shows - is escapism," said Joan Giglione, a lecturer in communication at California State University at Northridge. "They want something

that takes them away from stress, that takes them away from danger - where reality TV puts it right in their face" (Friedman, 2001 p. 4). However it seemed many viewers felt differently as indicated in a study conducted by Knowledge Networks-Statistical Research during the weekend of September 22, 2001. In the article "Consumers favor a return to TV programming, advertising," the results found that 80 percent of Americans felt it was acceptable for TV networks to return to normal schedule, and that schedule included reality programming (*MediaPost*, 2001).

In the fall of 2001, there were weak ratings for reality shows such as "The Amazing Race" and "The Mole 2: The Next Betrayal." But even with concern over the acceptability of the reality genre in the post 9-11 world, "Survivor: Africa" posted a strong household rating during its October 11, 2001 premiere, despite being pushed back 45 minutes by President Bush's primetime press conference (Friedman & Goetzl, 2001). The combined high ratings for both "Survivor: Africa" and the fourth installment "Survivor: Marquesas," which premiered in February 2002 encouraged other reality shows to return to the television schedule (Castleman & Podrazik, 2003). "A war may interrupt some network programming, but it won't affect people's appetite for these shows," Fox's VP of alternative programming Mike Darnell explained in *The Washington Times*. "You don't want to live the thing that is most bothering you, you want a reality show to provide escape" (Harper, 2003, p. A02).

By the mid 2001-2002 season, the networks seemed to agree with Darnell and started to pick up where they left off before September 11<sup>th</sup>. NBC brought back "Fear Factor" and ABC aired the remaining episodes of "The Mole: 2," which they had previously taken off the fall schedule. As the country adjusted to life after the September 11th tragedies, the reality genre had seemed to regain its audience and by 2003, *Variety* reported that during the February ratings

period that only 35 percent of programming on the major networks consisted of scripted television (Spigel, 2004). The high ratings and constant media attention showed the reality genre was going strong into the mid decade.

“Survivor” helped bring the reality genre to network primetime, and the show continued to encourage similar challenge themed programming such as ABC’s “I’m a Celebrity, Get Me out of Here.” However, some critics still doubted the longevity of unscripted television due to accusations that certain shows were deemed dangerous, disrespectful and in some cases rigged. Even executives closest to “Survivor” believed reality TV might run its course. “With the amount of reality shows announced, I’m sure this spring and next fall [networks] probably will have overdone it,” CBS President Les Moonves predicted at a press conference in 2003 (Harper, 2003, p. A02). But less than a year later, a new crop of reality shows hit the airwaves, one which helped NBC stay relevant at a time when two of the network’s most popular sitcoms, “Friends” and “Frasier” were ending their long run in the spring of 2004. Reality guru Mark Burnett struck gold again when he teamed with media and real estate mogul Donald Trump to create “The Apprentice” on NBC. The show was described as having the “Survivor” challenge aspect, only with its setting in an office building instead of a remote island. The format consisted of 16 business men and women varying in race, age and education level, competing in various work related tasks. The grand prize was not money, but a job working as a president of one of Trump’s many companies. Mr. Trump believed that by working with Burnett, “The Apprentice” would become a successful reality show. “I loved the concept from the very beginning, and saw precisely the connection to the “Survivor” format,” Trump told *The New York Times*. “I told Mark this is going to capture the viciousness of the business world. This is the real jungle, this jungle makes the other jungle look tame” (Carter, 2004, p. 4). “The Apprentice” premiered on

January 8, 2004 and was watched by over 20 million viewers, and the show's second season began airing in September later that same year. Meanwhile "Survivor" continued its success with over 20 million tuning in for the show's ninth installment, "Survivor: Vanuatu-Island of Fire" which debuted on September 16, 2004 (Lisotta, 2004).

### **Advertising and Product Integration**

The overwhelming success of challenge type reality shows such as "Survivor" and "The Apprentice" also helped prove that the reality genre could work in both the television and advertising world (Huff, 2006). While traditional TV programming consisted of a basic content, delivery and financing model, the success of these shows helped break the mold to create a new multimedia/advertiser integrated model. Since advertisers were also competing with the popularity of home recording devices such as TiVo, the concept of "live" TV became more appealing. One could argue the broadcast of a challenge program like "Survivor" is similar to a sport broadcast: there is a winner and loser, and viewers and fans want to see the action in real time (Magder, 2009). As "Survivor" mania swept the country in 2000, bars around the country held "watch parties" on Wednesday nights, websites popped up all over the internet devoted to the show, and major companies such as Anheuser-Bush had developed "Survivor" themed commercials (Peyser, et al., 2000).

Major brands such as Frito-Lay paid up to \$4 million to place their products in "Survivor," as viewers watched the hungry contestants compete for items such as Doritos. "It's probably the most creative use of product placement in TV," stated CBS spokesman Chris Ender to *The New York Times* in April 2001 (Brody, 2004, p. 123). TV executives and critics both saw "Survivor" as helping to narrow the once wide gap between programming and advertising.

“We're now just emerging from what one could call the golden age of separation of TV and advertising," Syracuse University director of the Center for the Study of Popular Television Robert Thompson stated to *The New York Times* (Collins, 2001, p. 19).

By the second season of “Survivor,” CBS had raised the cost of advertising from \$4 million to \$12 million for its major sponsors, which included Anheuser Busch, General Motors, Frito-Lay, Reebok International, Target Stores and Visa USA (Friedman & Halliday, 2000). It was evident to industry executives that television advertising was certainly evolving. “I think everybody realizes that they have to do business differently and they have to be more open than they were before, whether it’s buying advertiser-supplied programming, whether it’s integrating further into a show than you have before, or getting promotional consideration in another media, I just think the whole state of the business is changing,” an NBC executive told television industry trade magazine *Broadcasting and Cable* in 2001 (Brody, 2004, p. 126).

Product placement was a successful advertising strategy used in reality programs, and soon was being used in scripted television as well, as seen in 2000 when ABC sold the single sponsorship of its new show “Gideon’s Crossing” to Johnson & Johnson. The network did the same thing in 2001 as Nokia was the sole sponsor of the first episode of “Alias,” which went on to air for five successful seasons (Schlosser, 2001). “When the market is not as strong you are willing to do more,” stated ABC executive vice president of advertising, marketing and promotion Alan Cohen. “We here at ABC have had the approach that we want to do more of these deals because they help both of us; it helps get us more awareness and visibility, and it helps them sell more product” (Schlosser, 2001, p. 5). In August 2001, it was reported in *The New York Times* that the UPN network was considering selling its sponsors the chance to place their logos and brand names in the corner of the screen during programming (Elliott, 2001, p.



C1). While some industry executives blasted the idea as inappropriate and desperate, one argued that history had shown that when advertising came in a different form, at first consumers reacted negatively, but then they accepted it (Brody, 2004).

The advertising trend was attracting attention from other countries as well. Mark Stoman, a senior marketing agent with the American advertising firm Endeavor had this to say about product placement to a British newspaper in 2001, “Advertisers direct involvement in TV programs is one that looks likely to continue and, some say, increase” (Drummond, 2001, p. 6).

## **Conclusion**

By 2007 challenge reality shows were going strong. “Survivor: Fiji” the 14th edition in the show’s franchise, premiered on February 8, and was watched by nearly 17 million viewers (Rocchio & Rogers, 2007). The series continued with similar themed challenges from past seasons such as “brains verses muscle” as demonstrated in episode one when 54-year-old computer engineer Yau-Man Chan easily opened a wooden box that two of the younger athletic castaways had failed to break open. “[It was] very simple physics, the weakest point was to drop it on the corner so I dropped it on the corner twice and the box opened up,” Yau-Man explained (Rogers & Rocchio, 2007, p. 1). This season was also the first to have an odd amount of castaways, due to one contestant backing out the day before taping began. To avoid something like that from happening again, producers began picking backup players for each season. The show marked its 10th anniversary in 2010 with the premiere of “Survivor: Heroes vs. Villains,” which brought back former contestants from the past 19 seasons.

As of 2010, over 40 countries have adapted international versions of “Survivor” and many other challenge shows dominate the airwaves worldwide; further suggesting the impact of

the challenge sub-genre in both reality and the overall landscape of television. The high ratings and constant media attention of challenge shows such as “Survivor” helped to show the importance of this sub-genre. It was the first and most influential because it set the stage for the future sub-genres that followed, and led the way in the development of reality television.

“Survivor” is highly regarded as the groundbreaking show that caused an evolution in the television industry as reflected in a 2003 *Fortune* magazine interview with Gail Berman, Fox Entertainment president at the time. When asked what show did she wish Fox had, Berman quickly and simply answered, “Survivor, that’s the granddaddy of this form” (Berman & Wheat, 2003, p. 54).

Throughout the decade other reality sub-genres began to form and gained popularity in their own right. As the challenge sub-genre continued its success with “Survivor” leading the way, a new reality sub-genre was beginning to form and develop. By 2002 this new sub-genre would emerge and its “grandfather” program would become the most popular show in America, by involving the TV viewer like no other program in television history.

## Chapter 4: Talent

“You should get a lawyer and sue your vocal coach” (Carter, 2006, p. 1). Not exactly encouraging words of advice for an aspiring singer during an audition. But it was exactly that type of brutal honesty from British music executive Simon Cowell that helped to launch the pop culture phenomenon “American Idol” in 2002. The show revolved around a talent competition among “real” unknown singers to win the ultimate prize: a record deal with a major label. On the heels of “Survivor,” “American Idol” created another distinct TV reality sub-genre and helped pave the way for future shows that continue to fill the airwaves today. Thus these shows become the focus of the second reality sub-genre as defined by the researcher: the talent category.

The main characteristics of the talent sub-genre are natural abilities, performance, and capacity for success. Being judged or voted on is a key component, which often involves the audience (Mittell, 2010). The people who appear on talent reality shows want to make their dreams come true, or live the “American Dream.” The talent sub-genre showcases amateur performers often trying to compete for a reward or recognition, mainly through singing and dancing, but there are now reality shows where any quirk can be considered a “talent.” Fame is usually the result of winning as well as a lucrative financial contract for some product.

Another main characteristic of the talent sub-genre is the audience vote, which was not a factor in the previous challenge category. TV shows such as “Idol” were instrumental in popularizing viewer participation in reality shows, a trend that continues today. Creators and producers quickly realized how a viewer’s loyalty towards a particular program could increase if they felt they were directly effecting the outcome of a talent competition by helping to choose a winner.

Based on these characteristics, "American Idol" can be considered the "grandfather" of the talent category, as it was the first of this sub-genre to air to great success in America and involve public votes on broadcast television. To date "American Idol" has been the most watched TV series in the Nielsen ratings and the first program to hold the number one spot for six consecutive seasons; beating "All in the Family" and "The Cosby Show;" both of which were number one for five seasons (Mittell, 2010). Because of these facts, "American Idol" continues to be the standard to which other talent reality shows are held (Kelefa, 2005). The style and format of modern day reality talent shows that "Idol" made so popular continues to be seen in similar programs such as ABC's "Dancing with the Stars" and NBC's "America's Got Talent;" and shows yet to come such as Simon Cowell's new talent series "The X-Factor" set to debut in fall 2011 (Karger, 2011).

### **"American Idol": The Beginning**

"You're going to Hollywood!" Those four words began a journey for aspiring unknown singers who came from every area in the country trying to fulfill their dream of becoming a rock star. "American Idol: The Search for a Superstar" premiered on June 11, 2002, and combined aspects of a traditional talent competition similarly reflected in past television shows such as "Star Search" and "The Original Amateur Hour" but with audience and viewer participation. And unlike reality shows such as "Survivor" or "The Weakest Link," the format was designed to allow people to vote for a favorite singer, rather than voting off the least popular contestant (Castleman & Podrazik, 2003). After a grueling audition process, a cast of diverse singers were selected by three judges who were already a part of the music industry. The chosen singers

competed live each week in front of the judges and a studio audience for viewers votes, through both phone calling and texting.

After nearly three months of the contestants' ongoing drama, judges' critiques and public votes, 16.9 million viewers tuned in to Fox on September 4, 2002 as 20-year-old Texas waitress Kelly Clarkson became the country's first American Idol ('Idol' worth emulating, 2002). An emotional Clarkson then performed the ballad "A Moment like This," a song specifically written for the winner. The single quickly jumped from number 52 on Billboard's Hot 100 to number one, and a month later Clarkson's CD featuring the number one song had sold almost half a million copies (Holloway, 2002). The single also quickly became one of the most requested songs on radio stations all across the country, a reflection of listeners' investment and fascination with "American Idol" and Clarkson. "She's an incredible phenomenon," Clear Channel Communications senior vice president of programming Tom Poleman stated to *The New York Times* in October 2002. "It's been a long time since we've seen any artist with singles sales this high and this consistent" (Holloway, 2002, p. 9).

The high success of Clarkson and "Idol" may be due in part to how the winner is chosen. Teaming a judging panel together with viewer's votes to determine a winner in talent reality shows continues to be a proven success formula, as winners and finalists of "American Idol" and the British version "Pop Idol" have sold more than 47 million albums worldwide (C. Olson, 2008).

## **Audience voting and participation**

The audience vote is a key characteristic of the talent sub-genre and is an important factor when it comes to viewer loyalty for certain reality TV shows. While the judging panel in shows such as “American Idol,” is arguably influential, the fate of the contestants is solely decided by public vote and is a trend that can be traced back to the postwar television programs of the 1940s and 1950s. One early example is the long running “Queen for a Day,” which featured women contestants who shared their real-life troubles on air hoping to receive a reward, and it was up to the studio audience to vote and decide who would get their wish granted and be crowned queen (Lancioni, 2010). “Queen for a Day” began on radio in 1945 before moving to television in 1955, airing until 1964, and the longevity of the program suggests the popularity of the format (Roman, 2005). Over 50 years later, advances in technology allowed “American Idol” to take the audience voting trend to the next level by expanding it to include the viewer watching at home.

In the first season, each “Idol” contestant had a toll-free number that appeared on screen during the performance and again at the end of the program. Phone lines were open for two hours following the show, and viewers could vote for their favorite contestant by calling the specific number (American Idol, 2011). The enormous popularity of the voting system attracted major companies such as AT&T, who joined the show in the second season as a major sponsor and offered viewers another voting option through text messaging. The company received over 7 million texts during season two and the trend continued to rapidly increase. By 2009, AT&T reported more than 178 million text messages were placed during the eighth season (AT&T, 2009). Each call or text is counted as one registered vote and as “American Idol” gained popularity, the number of votes increased from 110 million in 2002 to over 500 million by 2005 (Magder, 2009).

The audience voting trend also spelled big bucks for British entrepreneur Edward Boddington, whose technology “vote management” firm Telescope Inc. counted the millions of votes that shows such as “Idol” received every season. The popularity of the audience voting trend in reality television helped companies such as Telescope turn a \$100,000 start-up capital into over \$10 million in revenue by 2004 (Tobin, 2010). As Ross (2008) argued, “American Idol” without voting is a good show, with voting and talking online, it’s a hit” (Ross, 2008, p. 256).

### **The hit show that almost wasn’t**

Similar to the success story of “Survivor,” the concept of “American Idol” was passed over by numerous cable channels and all the major broadcast networks before Fox eventually picked it up (Ross, 2008). But it was a long journey for show developer British music executive Simon Fuller. It began in April 2001, when Fuller along with his business partner Simon Cowell first came to the States to pitch an American version of a new music television show they were putting together called “Pop Idol.” Fuller and Cowell had no problem closing a deal in Britain, but initially they found no luck convincing American television executives on the concept. That is until “Pop Idol” began airing in October later that year and became a huge hit, with the two finalists’ albums selling millions of copies after the show had ended (Carter, 2006). Backed with new leverage and new representation from the Creative Artists Agency, a major Hollywood talent agency, Fuller again met with the major networks in the fall of 2001 in hopes that “Pop Idol” could follow the successful trend of importing British shows to the American airwaves such as “Who Wants to Be a Millionaire” and “Survivor.” But the program executives at ABC, NBC and CBS all passed, partly because similar formatted American musical programs such as

“Making the Band” (2000) and “Pop Stars” (2001) were considered failures that never clicked with a wide audience in the United States.

But things began to look up when Fuller pitched his idea to Fox’s Mike Darnell, head of the network’s reality division. Darnell expressed initial interest in the program, comparing it to “Survivor meets singing” and suggested it to Sandy Grushow, the head of entertainment for Fox (Austen, 2007). There was only one problem: money. Budget expenses would prevent Fox from paying a licensing fee and Grushow offered only one option: to have “Pop Idol” fully sponsored. “We don’t know much about this show,” Mr. Grushow told Fuller and the C.A.A representatives. “But if we can get it for nothing, it’s sort of a no-brainer” (Carter, 2006, p.1). Fuller agreed to try and line up possible sponsors, and Fox executives told him to come back when he had done so.

Meanwhile by early winter “Pop Idol” was becoming a huge hit in Britain attracting millions of viewers (CNN, 2002). As time passed with no commitment from Fox, Fuller and The Creative Artists Agency went back to ABC with a tape of the show hoping to spark interest, but the network passed for a second time. Fortunately for Fuller and his team, the show had attracted one loyal viewer who carried heavy weight at the Fox network. Elisabeth Murdoch, daughter of Rupert Murdoch, the founder of News Corporation which owned Fox, helped convince her father that “Pop Idol” was a hit, and urged him to buy the rights. The next day, at the instance of Mr. Murdoch (“Buy it! Right now”) Fox executives not only immediately closed the deal on “Idol,” but also increased the original proposed order of eight episodes to 15 (Carter, 2006, p. 1). They also planned to keep the show similar to the British version, which included bringing on board brutally honest “Pop Idol” judge Simon Cowell. Two more American judges with extensive backgrounds in the music industry rounded out the panel: Paula Abdul, who had several hit



singles, albums and awards under her belt, and Randy Jackson, who had been a successful music producer and executive for nearly 20 years (Castleman & Podrazik, 2003). Fox producers felt the word “pop” was outdated in the United States and at Darnell’s suggestion the show was renamed “American Idol: Search for a Superstar,” later shortened to simply “American Idol.” One thing that would not change would be judge Simon Cowell’s freedom to critique and put down contestants the way he saw fit, challenging what he described as a wave of terrible political correctness in both England and America (Carter, 2006).

The show premiered in the summer of 2002 to 10 million viewers and was an instant hit. Cowell’s comments about contestants’ singing abilities in the early episodes of season one seemed to attract viewers as much as the talent did. People began to tune in to hear what kind of insult Cowell would deliver next, as he quickly became a reality TV villain fans loved to hate. “Simon Cowell says the things that are so nasty, that you really wouldn't think that anyone could ever say things like that,” commented viewer Kate Johns (Johns, 2008).

### **Simon Cowell**

Indeed, it became clear early on that while “Idol’s” big attraction was the amateur talent, many viewers were tuning into watch what crass, brutally honest comment judge Simon Cowell would utter next. It was not uncommon for Cowell to describe contestants’ vocals as “pathetic” or “rubbish” (Dam & Chiu, 2002, p. 107). While “Idol’s” other two judges Randy Jackson and Paula Abdul seemed to carefully construct their comments and feedback, Cowell quickly became known as the British judge who could bring any singing hopeful to tears. But Cowell made no apologies for his brutally honest and often entertaining style as reflected in a *Billboard* article shortly after “Idol” premiered. “We warned people beforehand, don’t be in this contest if you

can't sing or if you can't take criticism" (Hay, 2002, p. 64). That said many of the contestants still had issues with the way Cowell expressed himself. "He tried to embarrass me on national TV," 23-year-old Tamika Bush told *People* magazine in 2002 after being told by Cowell that she needed singing lessons after performing the Whitney Houston classic ballad "Greatest Love of All." "I truly believe he enjoys getting people upset" (Dam & Chiu, 2002, p. 107). But if the thousands of aspiring singers thought Cowell's comments were cruel and disrespectful, "Idol" fans could not seem to get enough of his zingy one liners. Blogger Kate Johns wrote in 2008 that she suspected Cowell knew the majority of the public loved to hate him, and was most likely laughing all the way to the bank (Johns, 2008).

### **"American Idol:" The smash hit of 2002**

The different styles and the back-and-forth banter among of the judges combined with the raw talent of the "Idol" singing hopefuls helped the summer reality show soar in the ratings, prompting Fox to order a second season to begin airing in January 2003 (Austen, 2007). The series returned with a few changes such as making Ryan Seacrest the main host by dropping co-host Brian Dunkleman, and adding a new celebrity musical mentor/judge every week. "American Idol's" strong ratings helped Fox win the February "sweeps" ratings period in the coveted 18 to 49 demographic group for the first time in the network's history (Castleman & Podrazik, 2003). In May 2003, more than 38 million viewers watched Ruben Studdard beat Clay Aiken by only 100,000 votes in the nail biting season finale. Aiken's die hard fans, known as 'claymates' blamed flooded phone lines for the loss and accused "Idol" of rigging the competition, a debate that made national headlines (Jefferson, 2003). Aiken was voted the 2003 "Favorite reality star" by *TV Guide* readers and "the most-loved reality star of all time" in a *TV Guide* poll in the

summer of 2005 further establishing “American Idol” as a game changer for network television (Gazan, 2005).

Most critics and industry executives were in agreement, Fox had the most talked about show in the most talked about format: reality TV. The back story and personal life of “Idol” performers also attracted fans, making reality shows similar to prime time soap operas or dramas. The only difference was reality shows such as “American Idol” did not have the need for expensive writers to create fictional drama (Castleman & Podrazik, 2003). By May of 2003, a total of 25 non-scripted series were airing on the broadcast networks that season, which at the time set a new record for reality television (Rice, 2003).

#### **“American Idol:” A talent reality show**

One of the mottos of “American Idol” is “you vote, you decide” and seemed to set the tone for the talent sub-genre. Those words implied an element of choice when it came to a reality show competition involving one’s natural skill; and an expectation that “American Idol” would create enough of an appeal to viewers to actively get them to participate in choosing a winner. One could argue the format of “Idol” established the way talent reality shows would continue throughout the decade. It is important to understand how the simple idea of a singing contest could capture the nation and attract millions of faithful viewers, viewers who were willing to invest so much of their time in the show through making phone calls, sending text messages and even purchasing contestant CDs or attending concerts. Some researchers believe that the key ingredient that helped make “Idol” fans so engaged in the show is the attraction of becoming part of the story. As Ross (2008) pointed out, the popularity and increased use of the Internet also helped promote and maintain television viewership. With programs such as “Idol,” fans from all

over the world could unite online to discuss the show and talk about their feelings about the contestants and judges, which could further deepen a viewer's loyalty and devotion to the show. The fact that it was the viewers who ultimately chose the "Idol" winner might be one reason the show gained momentum so quickly, while showing no signs of slowing down. As Jenkins (2009) suggested, "American Idol" allowed viewers to get to know the contestants as they watched them improve or crash and burn each week, and that personal connection could be a contributing factor to the enormous commercial success of "Idol" in comparison to earlier talent competition shows broadcast on TV.

Just as the success of "Survivor" helped generate similar challenge reality programs, "American Idol" can be credited for the onslaught of talent reality shows developed after the series finale in September 2002. Within months, CBS announced plans to debut a revamped version of the original talent show "Star Search" (1983-1995) which would be hosted by Arsenio Hall. Around 14 million viewers tuned in as "Star Search" began its nine episode run on Wednesday January 8, 2003 winning its 8pm timeslot (Levin, 2003). The show's format was set up similar to "Idol," which combined interactive viewer voting with celebrity judges, but included four talent categories: adult singer, junior singer, comic and supermodel (Rogers, 2003). The new "Star Search" was just one example of a talent program that followed in the footsteps of "American Idol;" one which helped push the reality genre into the regular fall and winter TV schedule in 2003. Just weeks after Jeff Zucker claimed his network would only broadcast reality TV during the summer, the NBC Entertainment president was re-arranging his primetime lineup to create space for unscripted programming (Adalian, 2003).

"American Idol" continued to influence the new wave of talent reality shows that hit the U.S airwaves. In the summer of 2005 Fox premiered "So You Think You Can Dance," which

was created by” “Idol” producer Nigel Lythgoe, who also served as the executive producer and lead judge for the show. Lythgoe did not hide the fact that “Idol” was the inspiration for the new talent program. “When we first started Dance, we just wanted another successful TV show,” Lythgoe stated in *Dance Magazine* in 2007. “Everybody was ripping Idol off, so we thought, let’s look at some other area to do the format” (Looseleaf, 2007, p. 42). “Idol’s” successful formula of ‘mean judge vs. nice judge’ also seemed to work in the dance format, as Lythgoe was dubbed “Nasty Nigel” and often compared to Simon Cowell (Rushfield, 2011).

The other major networks continued to follow the talent reality trend after “American Idol;” “Dancing with the Stars” debuted on ABC in 2005 and the next year NBC answered with “America’s Got Talent,” which was produced by “Idol’s” Simon Cowell (Carter, 2009). Both shows received high ratings and attracted a loyal audience, firmly cementing the genre as “American Idol” continued to influence future television programming.

Soon the talent reality show genre was not limited to the major broadcast networks as demonstrated in March 2003, when the USA Network premiered “Nashville Star,” which was similar to “Idol” but with strictly country music as song choices. Despite a seemingly solid format, some viewers and critics were skeptical. “I can’t tell you how many times I heard, this had better not be Hee Haw,” George Verschoor, executive producer of “Nashville Star” told *USA Today* (Mansfield, 2003, p. 06e).

Although the show drew only around 2 million viewers (compared to “American Idol’s” 20 million) the ratings for “Nashville Star” were a boost for the USA network and the series continued for five seasons. The show produced some moderate success stories, but probably the biggest name to come from the country talent show was Miranda Lambert. The 19-year-old Texas native placed third in the first season of “Nashville Star,” and in 2005 Lambert’s first

album debuted at number one on the Billboard Country Music charts, proving a reality show contestant does not necessarily have to win in order to achieve success (Powell & Atlas, 2006). Eight years after Lambert got her big break on “Nashville Star,” she took home three major awards on the 2010 Academy of Country Music Awards, including ‘Top Female Vocalist’ (Cackett, 2011).

Other cable channels found success with talent reality programs such as UPN’s “America’s Next Top Model” (2003) and Bravo’s “Project Runway,” (2004) which seemed to further validate the notion that TV viewers loved to watch shows that revolved around ordinary people using their natural abilities and skills to try and achieve different variations of the American dream.

### **And now a word from our sponsor...**

In 2008 it was reported that Fox received an estimated \$700,000 for a 30-second commercial spot on “American Idol,” further supporting research suggesting the entire television medium is based on the multi billion-dollar advertising industry (Grover & Kiley, 2008). According to the Federal Communications Commission more than \$41 billion was spent in broadcast television advertising in the United States in 2002 (Kaufman, 2004). But in recent years video recorders such as TiVo have made it easy to skip through the traditional TV commercial, and an advertising technique known as product placement has become a more cost-effective way to reach the average consumer (Lowry & Helm, 2009). “Advertisers have been frustrated by the increasing research showing more people ad-skipping and multitasking on PCs and mobile phones while watching TV and are getting much better at understanding the true

return on their advertising investment,” said Andy Prakken, vice-president of media buying agency Mindshare/Team Detroit (Kiley, 2009, p. 1).

More so than the reality shows that came before, “Idol” can be credited with popularizing the product placement trend in reality primetime television; a practice that continues to prove successful today. According to *AdAge* magazine, AT&T Wireless, Coca-Cola and Ford each spent \$26 million per integration/sponsorship deal for the second season on “American Idol” (Friedman & Goetzel, 2002). The deal included commercials and product placement, with segments of each “Idol” show sandwiched between ads for each company as well having their brands and products showcased in each episode. Viewers witnessed everything from a judge taking a drink from a Coca Cola glass to the AT&T Wireless symbol appearing after each contestant sang (Sanneh, 2005). While product placement was considered a successful advertising tool by insiders, some fans of “Idol” were not convinced of the strategy. “I know they want to make money,” said Caitlin Knott, an 18-year-old viewer from Michigan. “But no one wants to see Ryan Seacrest selling stuff” (Grover & Kiley, 2008, p. 38). However a case study completed by *Advertising Age* in 2008 found favorable results for both Coca-Cola and Cingular, (now AT&T) stating that both brands had clearly increased their equity during a viewing of “American Idol” (Lindstrom, 2008). And clearly companies such as Ford planned on returning as one of the show’s major advertisers. “If we didn’t, [the slot] would be snapped up by a competitor in a heartbeat,” Ford general marketing manager John Felice stated in a *Business Week* article (Grover & Kiley, 2008, p. 39). After only two years on the air, *Forbes* ranked “American Idol” as the most profitable of all reality series, estimating it made Fox more than \$260 million by the third season (Patsuris, 2004).

Other broadcast networks and cable channels also began to aggressively use product integration in their unscripted programming. According to Nielsen, there were more than 22,000 occurrences of product placement by broadcast networks during the first three quarters of 2007 and more than 136,000 placements for cable channels. ABC senior VP of integrated marketing Dan Longest explained one reason product placement continued to succeed in primetime television was because it made sense to build brands into the story lines of reality TV (Brunelli, 2008, p. 11). “American Idol” continued to lead the way with more than 4,000 product placement occurrences in 2007, followed by similar talent reality shows such as “America’s Next Top Model” (*MediaWeek*, 2008).

Network and cable channels continued to follow in the advertising trend that “American Idol” helped to make so successful, strongly suggesting that “Idol” is one of the most successful shows in the history of television and could be considered a model for other TV shows, marketers, and advertisers (Jenkins, 2009).

### **Controversy and backlash**

Few could argue that “American Idol” has created an empire, but that does not mean the show did not suffer from growing pains and criticism along the way. During the season two finale in 2003, only an average of 100,000 votes out of the 24 million cast separated Clay Aiken and Ruben Studdard, prompting many viewers to complain about the voting system. Fans claimed millions of votes were not counted due to the flooded phone lines. Dee Law, a 40-year-old “Idol” fan from Pennsylvania, said she tried to dial more than 500 times on the night of the finale to vote for Clay Aiken, but lost faith in the process when she was unable to place her vote. “I’m not going to get suckered into voting again,” Law said in a *Broadcasting and Cable*



interview. “Why should we sit here and waste two hours of our time when our votes aren’t going to be counted?” (Seibel, 2004, p. 1) The negative publicity increased when Fox declined to comment on the controversy surrounding the voting system, as fans complained that text-messengers had an unfair advantage (Jefferson, 2003).

By the third season the controversy made national headlines when some “Idol” fans decided to take matters into their own hands. In May 2004, there were over 24 formal complaints filed to the Federal Communications Commission (Jenkins, 2009). Around the same time, an attorney from Georgia Lisa Newman posted an online petition urging Fox to extend the two hour voting window and limit the amount of votes per phone line; in less than a week over 3,200 fans had signed the petition, prompting Fox to announce that the voting for the season three finale would be extended to four hours (*Reality TV World*, 2004). Fox acknowledged that local phone companies could not handle the enormous amount of calls trying to connect to AT&T’s network, which resulted in flaws in the voting system .Eventually the network decided to permanently expand “Idol’s” voting hours and add more phone lines (Seibel, 2004). But it would not be the last time “American Idol’s” voting system would come under fire.

In March 2005, incorrect phone numbers appeared on screen for three contestants during season four; as a result Fox aired a new performance show the next night, re-opened the voting and pushed back the results show from Wednesday to Thursday (MSNBC, 2006). The drama continued the next year in May 2006, as fans were outraged and judges dumbfounded when rocker Chris Daughtry was unexpectedly voted off the fifth season of “American Idol.” Within days an online petition surfaced with more than 16,000 names attached demanding a recount of the votes (Song, 2006). Once again many viewers cited problems with the show’s voting system, claiming that when they called to vote for Daughtry, they were misdirected to a recorded

greeting from “Idol” contestant Katharine McPhee thanking them for the vote, but Fox went on record stating there were no issues with the phone lines the evening of Daughtry’s last performance (MSNBC, 2006). The show’s voting process made headlines again in 2009 for a number of scandalous occurrences, including when fans who believed they were calling a phone number to vote for contestant Alexis Grace reached a sex hotline instead, and when reports surfaced that corporate sponsor AT&T may have swayed votes during the season eight finale between Kris Allen and Adam Lambert (Mansfield, 2009). According to *The Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*, AT&T provided phones for free text-messaging services and helped fans cast multiple votes at once at watch parties organized by fans of Kris Allen, who went on to win the competition (Wyatt, 2009). Shortly after the company issued a statement, which affirmed the fact that local AT&T employees were invited to parties organized by Allen’s home town community and “provided texting tutorials to those who were interested,” and “going forward, we will make sure our employees understand our sponsorship celebrates the competition, not individual contestants. That said it's quite a leap to suggest that a few individuals could have impacted the final results” (Mansfield, 2009, p. 10d).

Voting has not been the only controversy “American Idol” has faced over the years. Contestants have been dismissed due to various secrets from their past, including criminal records, prior record contracts, inappropriate online photos, and judges have been accused of favoritism among the contestants. In May 2005, Paula Abdul found herself in the middle of media frenzy when former season two finalist Corey Clark claimed he had an affair with the female judge during taping. Clark also claimed Abdul secretly helped him with his vocals and bought him clothes. Clark’s claims were highly contested by Abdul, and “Idol” producers issued this statement to *People* magazine: “Corey Clark was removed from the show for failing to

disclose his criminal arrest history, we recommend that the public carefully examine Mr. Clark's motives, given his apparent desire to exploit his prior involvement with American Idol for profit and publicity. We will, of course, look into any evidence of improper conduct that we receive" (Tauber, Smolowe, Keel, Comander, Dampier, Jones, Rizzo, & Wang, 2005, p. 85). After a three month investigation, Fox announced that they found no evidence to support Clark's claims against Abdul (Inquiry Finds No Wrongdoing by TV Host, 2005). Despite all of the controversy, "American Idol" continued to be a constant ratings winner as it began its ninth season in 2010.

## **Conclusion**

As the decade came to a close "American Idol" was still pulling in on average 25 million viewers an episode, despite recent changes to the format which included a judge shake-up in 2009 when Paula Abdul left after season eight and was replaced by comedian and talk show host Ellen DeGeneres in 2010. It seemed change could not slow down the Fox powerhouse as ratings increased by 12 percent from the previous week when DeGeneres made her debut (Vary, 2010). Shortly after, the show was hit again when fan favorite Simon Cowell announced he would not be returning as a judge for season ten, leaving many to wonder if "Idol" would survive. The season finale was bittersweet for many loyal Idol fans who watched finalist Lee DeWyze beat Crystal Bowersox to become the newest Idol in May 2010, but Cowell reassured the public the show would go on by simply stating, "The show goes forward, it will be different" (A. Stanley, 2010, p. 18).

Dozens of rumors and speculations were finally put to rest in September 2010, as Fox announced that the new "American Idol" judges for its 10th season would be Aerosmith front man Steven Tyler and singer/actress Jennifer Lopez, with Randy Jackson serving as the only

remaining original judge (Vary, 2010). Fox executives were cautiously optimistic about how the changes would affect their number one show. “If we can get to the end of our 10th season in transition with new casting and get anywhere close to being the No.1 (network) again, that would be a tremendous achievement,” Fox chairman Peter Rice stated in *USA Today* (Levin, 2011, p. 01d). The network proved it could still hold its own, as the 10th season premiere of “American Idol” attracted more than 25 million viewers, a nod to the show’s popularity and staying power (Toff, 2011).

Whether or not Fox will continue to dominate the ratings with “American Idol” is yet to be seen. But judging from the success of the past nine years one could argue that talent reality shows have found their niche in primetime television. Viewers learn about the contestants’ personalities and get to know their background story, and shows such as “Idol” seem to capture television moments that stick with loyal viewers. “Still to this day, by far my favorite “American Idol” moment is Bo Bice singing a capella,” said fan Jim Hellriegel. “I have that on my iPod, so I think there are those moments where people just love that feeling of their favorite just doing really well” (Ross, 2008, p. 87). Supported by nearly a decade of consistently high ratings, “American Idol” has become regarded as a programming force unlike any the television industry had experienced before. “I think ‘Idol’ is the most impactful show in the history of television,” said Jeff Zucker, executive of NBC Universal (Carter, 2007, p. 1).

As the research has suggested, “American Idol” was a ground-breaking show that was instrumental in helping to develop the talent sub-genre on primetime television. But even as the juggernaut continued to dominate the ratings and reality market, another reality genre was on the horizon; one that would change the way TV viewers looked at themselves and their lifestyle.

## Chapter 5: Makeover

A Los Angeles couple choosing love over luxury by crowding into a small house after adopting nieces and nephews who were left orphaned when their parents were killed by gang violence. That is just one example of a deserving family chosen for a home makeover on the ABC reality show “Extreme Makeover: Home Edition.” In 2003, while “Survivor” castaways continued to battle for the ultimate cash prize and “American Idol” hopefuls continued to sing for their lucky break, there was a new type of reality TV category beginning to emerge that focused on love and transformation. Many of these programs were widely considered “feel-good” reality which focused on helping their contestants change some area of their life. According to researchers, personal transformation programs flooded the American airwaves 50 years earlier, possibly more so than in the 2004 primetime schedule (Watts, 2009, p. 302). Because of this history and modern day popularity, these types of programs become the focus of the third reality sub-genre as defined by the researcher: the makeover category.

The main characteristics of the makeover sub-genre are improvement, corrective measures, life and or home transformation /renovation and thriving in different environments. Contestants are on this type of show because they want to change something about themselves or their lifestyle. This can include everything from one’s self-image to one’s home or job, to one’s dating life; there are even reality shows on how to improve your pet. Producers of makeover reality shows set out to find ‘real’ people deserving of a transformation in some area of their life (Watts, 2009). The characteristics of this sub-genre offer people something they probably would not have access to, if not for the reality show (Huff, 2006). There are two specific parts to this subgenre: the first focuses on making over one’s romantic life and dating; the second focuses on making over one’s personality or home. Based on these characteristics, there are two reality

shows that are considered the best examples reflecting the foundation of this sub-genre. They are “The Bachelor” and “Extreme Makeover: Home Edition.”

### **Sub-genre part one: Will you accept this rose?**

Dating shows are nothing new to American television. In the 1960s “The Dating Game” and “The Newlywed Game” premiered on American television and went on to air in various versions for more than 30 years (Roman, 2005). In the 1970s there was “The Dating Game” and in the 1980s “Love Connection.” In the 1990s “Blind Date” and “elimiDate” both were successful in syndication (Lancioni, 2010). All of these shows attempted to match a contestant to a potential date by asking a series of questions; and many of the responses provided for entertaining “must-talk-about” television (Gray, 2009, p. 260). One could argue that modern dating shows such as “The Bachelor” are new versions of an old format; one that lures viewers with romance, drama and fantasy (James, 2003).

In 2002, many television executives were still cautious about the dating reality shows, due to the controversy that surrounded the Mike Fleiss created “Who Wants to Marry a Millionaire,” which despite high ratings, resulted in terrible reviews and publicity (Reisner, 2009). Determined to try again, Fleiss developed another reality romance show called “The Bachelor,” which featured 25 young women competing for one man as a possible husband (Castleman & Podrazik). The show was turned down by three networks before ABC picked up the program, which had all the components of a modern day fairy tale: a handsome Harvard graduate, a beautiful Malibu mansion, and elaborate dates with “rose ceremonies” serving as the elimination round. In January 2002, Alex Michael was introduced as the first “Bachelor,” and when asked by host Chris Harrison why he chose to be on the show, Michael replied “I was

thinking that I want to meet someone great, and that I think having time to dedicate to nothing but that is a great luxury" (Rosett, 2002, p. A25).

Despite being panned by many critics as being a cheesy reality show, the show was a ratings boost for ABC, with over 19 million viewers watching Michael hand out the last rose to 23-year-old event planner Amanda Marsh on the season finale (Bellafante, 2003). Rumors quickly began to swirl that Michael had continued to pursue runner-up 29-year-old physical therapist Trista Rehn months after the show had ended, a rumor that was validated by Rehn when she admitted in a *TV Guide* interview that Michael told her after filming that "he had made a mistake" (Rogers, 2003). The tabloid talk proved to be great publicity for "The Bachelor" and ABC soon developed a spinoff series. Rehn was given a second shot at love and brought back as the star of "The Bachelorette," in which the format was flipped and featured 25 suitors competing for one woman. "Once Trista was dissed on national TV," said co-executive producer Lisa Levenson, "we got hundreds of letters, e-mails, phone calls [from viewers who wanted to date her] that we didn't know what to do with. Trista specifically piqued something in men and woman" (Shaw & Rice, 2003, p. 40). ABC executives hoped the series would help examine gender roles when it came to dating. The series "will force all of us to look at those double standards," network President Susan Lyne stated in a *Time* magazine article (Orecklin, 2002, p. 68). "The Bachelorette" began airing in January 2003 and averaged around 15 million viewers (Barker, 2003).

### **"The Bachelor:" A dating makeover reality show**

"I have to get married soon, or my dad is going to kill me," said 31-year-old Boston native Jessica Belzer in a 2002 *New York* magazine article (Grigoriadis, 2002, p. 20). Belzer was

one of the thousands of single women who auditioned for “The Bachelor” every season. The 25 women cast in each installment of the series all proclaimed to be looking for love, and makeover reality TV shows made that search appear to be glamorous and carefree. Millions of viewers tuned in every week to watch attractive young adults meet, date and fall in love, all in a short amount of time. While most critics saw dating reality shows as mindless entertainment, some experts defended the “love at first sight” concept of TV shows such as “The Bachelor.” “It’s absolutely possible to walk into a room and talk briefly with maybe four men or women, all dressed the way you like, and find that three are very nice, but the fourth really turns you on,” stated Rutgers University anthropologist Helen Fisher, an expert in romantic attachments (Peterson, 2003, p. 12d). On “The Bachelor,” producers used exotic destinations, expensive jewelry and beautiful gowns to glamorize the dating process, and according to Punyanunt-Carter (2010), viewers who watched the program would often become caught up in the fantasy of falling in love under similar circumstances. Whether or not TV couples such as Alex Michael and Amanda Marsh made it work off camera did not seem as important to viewers who seemed more intrigued with watching a potential courtship develop onscreen. That notion was supported by Professor Alexandra Hambright Solomon, who believed the appeal of dating reality shows was based less on the outcome and more on the process of seeing why a person would find another attractive and how the couple connected. “We get sucked in by will-they-or-won’t-they propositions,” said Hambright, a marriage course teacher at Northwestern University (Keveney, 2003a, p. 01d). TV executives echoed that sentiment, recognizing these shows were built on the possibility of happily-ever-after. “They’re [the audience] going along for the ride and don’t seem to be preoccupied with the aftermath,” Fox programming chief Gail Berman stated in a *USA Today* article (Keveney, 2003a, p. 01d).



As shown in the previous two sub-genres, the grandfather reality TV shows went on to inspire a whole new crop of similarly formatted programming. ABC's "The Bachelor" pushed the other major American networks to develop their own dating shows; 2003 saw CBS's "Cupid," and NBC's "Average Joe" and "For Love or Money" (Gray, 2009). But it was Fox's "Joe Millionaire" whose January 6th premiere was the highest rated that season, as more than 18 million viewers tuned into the 'Bachelor with a twist' reality show (Sigismund, 2003, p. 83). Similar to "The Bachelor," the Fox show featured a cast of young women who believed they were competing for the affections of an eligible multimillionaire named Evan Marriott. But there was a twist: Marriott was actually a blue collar construction worker who only made \$19,000 a year, a ruse that only the audience knew. Even Marriott himself admitted the show's producers initially hid the real premise from him. "The day before I left for France, I signed confidentiality papers which said what the show was about," Marriott told *Time* magazine in 2003. "At that point, could I really back out?" (Poniewozik & Goehner, 2003, p. 64)

The deception paid off as an estimated 36 million viewers tuned in for the February 17th finale of "Joe Millionaire," making it the most-watched telecast since the season two premiere of "Survivor" in January 2001 (Nelson, 2003). The *USA Today* front-page headline of "Million dollar finish" was reflective of the national media attention the show had attracted further suggesting the popularity of the dating makeover sub-genre (Reality TV provides nice escape, 2003, p. 12a).

### **Makeover sub-genre part two: You, only better**

As the popularity of dating reality programs grew, one might argue the next logical development in reality could be going from making over one's dating life to making over one's

physical appearance. This transition could be seen in shows such as “Extreme Makeover,” which premiered as a special on ABC in December 2002. The format: ordinary men and women volunteered to undergo an extensive physical transformation. The makeover included changes in diet, exercise, wardrobe, make-up and hairstyle, and also plastic surgery. The contestant could not have any outside contact with family or friends during the procedure, and each episode would end with the contestant going home and cameras filming the family’s reaction to the dramatic change. Creator Howard Schultz told the *New York Daily News* (December 2002) that throughout the casting process, he looked for people who could best benefit from plastic surgery, but could not afford it (Huff, 2006, p. 71). Although some believed “Extreme Makeover” was sending the wrong message to its audience, more than 13 million people tuned in for the December special and ABC quickly turned it into a series.

According to researchers, makeover programs that promise personal transformation have been around since the early days of broadcasting. Shows such as “Queen for a Day,” (1945-64) “Strike it Rich” (1947-58) and “The Big Payoff” (1951-59) were all postwar programs broadcast on network primetime, formatted around contestants who disclosed their personal hardships hoping for a prize. According to Lancioni (2010) these shows bore two distinct characteristics found in modern day makeover shows. The first was the assumption that sharing personal feelings was an essential part in getting help and the second was the expectation that changing something on the outside would affect how a person felt on the inside (p. 5). But in 2003, a reality program was being developed that used an opposite approach in order to achieve the transformation found in a makeover show.

As seen with the previous sub-genres, when one major network had a hit show, the others raced to formulate a similar one. So far the makeover sub-genre shows such as ABC’s “Extreme

Makeover” and Fox’s “The Swan” focused on making over one’s physical appearance mainly through plastic surgery which helped support Lancioni’s (2010) theory about the similar characteristics found in past and present makeover programs. In 2003, NBC approached a production company named Reveille to develop a plastic-surgery reality series, but instead Reveille suggested a makeover program which focused on obese people losing weight strictly by diet and exercise (Snierson, 2009). Network executives at first hesitated, worried that the idea would not result in a big enough change to make for a hit TV show. But producers believed in the idea of transforming one’s body without any liposuction, and the hiring of trainers Bob Harper and Jillian Michaels helped seal the deal. The trainers’ motto: “work from the inside out” as Harper argued, “The body is going to follow where the mind leads them” (Jones, 2010, p. 72). “The Biggest Loser” debuted in October 2004 to 10 million viewers and became a surprise hit for NBC. Unlike most reality shows which filmed for three or four weeks, contestants spent 12 weeks at a California ranch as they competed to see who could shed the most weight and fix their bodies. The blood, sweat, tears and ultimately pounds shed by the contestants resonated with viewers and by 2009 more than 15,000 pounds had been lost by contestants (Snierson, 2009). Similar to previous makeover programs, “The Biggest Loser’s” format revolved around the “reveal” of the final contestants and the comparison to the “before and after” transformation (Jones, 2010). With the reality genre in full swing, perhaps it was the timing that helped updated makeover programs to find primetime success, which would prompt one network to develop a spinoff series which would once again shift the focus of the makeover sub-genre.

**“Extreme Makeover: Home Edition:” A feel-good makeover reality show**

With the success of ABC's "Extreme Makeover" came the spinoff "Extreme Makeover: Home Edition," which premiered as a 13 part special in December 2003. Led by host Ty Pennington and his design team, each episode focused on a deserving family facing some sort of struggle. That family would get a week's vacation and during that time, their house would be completely renovated and transformed (Polter, 2005). In many instances, a new house was built completely. Both shows generated an extreme reaction, the original focusing more on one's physical appearance while the spinoff tended to garner more of an emotional one. "People ask us how they can help," said "Home Edition" executive producer Tom Forman. "It reminds us what good people we really are" (Poniewozik & McDowell, 2005, p. 48). In comparison, the original "Extreme Makeover" seemed shallow and superficial and ratings began to slip. "Extreme Makeover: Home Edition" became more successful than the original "Extreme Makeover," which was eventually cancelled after four seasons (Tarrant, 2010).

After only one year on the air, "Extreme Makeover: Home Edition" jumped in the ratings, consistently rating in the Nielsen Top 20 during the 2004-2005 TV, suggesting the broad audience appeal for this type of "feel good" makeover reality TV (Paulsen, 2004). Critics such as *Time* magazine's James Poniewozik also seemed to embrace the reality trend, saying that it was "good to see TV using its resources for an act of charity other than giving Jenny McCarthy a sitcom" (Watts, 2009, p. 301).

On average the show would receive more than 1,000 applications a day from families across the country hoping to be cast in an episode. More than 14 million viewers would tune in to watch Pennington and his team help create a new home for a deserving family, which would usually also result in a new life. "You see this on TV but you never think it will happen to you,"

said Jerlene Lane of Florida, whose family was featured on the show in 2005 (Jerome, Fields-Meyer, Klise, Lang & Rozsa, 2005, p. 137).

The feel good theme of “Extreme Makeover: Home Edition” seemed to inspire the generosity of local community members such as George Orfanakos from New Jersey, who would donate their time, money and services. “It brings out the best in people and for television to do that, thank God, because it’s not doing that all the time,” Orfanakos stated when asked what made him get involved with the show (Wilhelm, 2007, p. 12).

As reality programming continued to grow, the addition of shows such as “Extreme Makeover: Home Edition” seemed to balance out a genre that up until that point, was mainly characterized competition, greed, power, and lust (Simon, 2005). Feel good reality programs are capable of invoking a feeling of “neighborliness” among its viewers during a time when the country faced an uncertain future. As the war on terror and the hurricane devastated Gulf Region dictated the social atmosphere, these type of makeover programs could provide relief both physically and emotionally (Edwards, 2010, p. 135). According to host Ty Pennington the show served as a reminder that a little kindness can go a long way. “How much better you can make the whole world if you just care about your neighbors” (Polter, 2005, p. 38).

### **“Extreme Makeover: Home Edition” inspires “feel-good” reality**

In 2005, “Extreme Makeover: Home Edition” seemed to inspire similar programs, as networks jumped at the chance to develop new reality shows around a person’s need for help, be it financial, medical, physical or psychological. NBC along with Christian singer Amy Grant created “Three Wishes,” in which each week a small town is selected and three people were granted a life changing gifts such as operations and adoption (Flynn, 2005). ABC continued the

trend with “The Scholar,” in which 10 honor students competed for a college scholarship. The lead sponsor of the show was corporate giant Wal-Mart, further cementing the tie between reality television and product placement. “We're looking for new channels to take the Wal-Mart message, and product integration is one way to do that and within the context of this show there seemed to be a great way to take our foundation message in terms of corporate community giveback to consumers," said Joe Myers, vice-president at Bernstein-Rein the advertising agency of Wal-Mart (O'Laughlin, 2005, p. 11). Even mega reality producer Mark Burnett was following the feel good reality trend by developing a series for “Touched by an Angel” stars Roma Downey and Della Reese, in which the two ladies would help people with their problems in a show called “Giving Hope” (Rogers, 2005). Networks seemed to view this new wave of programming as a positive change in the reality genre as summarized by Andrew Glassman, “Three Wishes” executive producer “People seeing wishes and dreams come true will always resonate” (Poniewozik & McDowell, 2005, p. 49). That resonance could be a direct result of the ideals for which this country was founded on. Just as immigrants migrated to the United States in search of the American dream, makeover reality programs can provide TV viewers with hope for a better tomorrow based on the idea of transformation (Heinricy, 2010).

## **Conclusion**

“Extreme Makeover: Home Edition” began its eight season in the fall 2010 and averaged around nine million viewers (Gillien, 2011). The show continued to provide new homes to deserving families with the help of local communities. In fact in most instances there were so many volunteers offering their time that the show had to turn many away (Nathans-Kelly, 2010). It was the human-interest stories that drove “Extreme Makeover: Home Edition,” and according

to host Ty Pennington a major contributor to the show's success. "I think all of us want to believe that when things go terribly wrong and we end up in bad situations, somebody is going to care enough to step in and make a difference," Pennington stated in a 2008 *Saturday Evening Post* interview (Miller, 2008). Aside from local volunteers, celebrities including NFL stars, ESPN analysts and Disney Channel actors would come to appear as special guests on the show (Raffel, 2010). "Extreme Makeover: Home Edition" continually rated among the top 20 TV shows, and was critically praised by TV insiders such as Jonathan Storm of the *Philadelphia Inquirer*. "These shows require absolutely no effort to watch, and apparently, people find them more dramatic than scripted drama," Storm said in an *Advertising Age* article (T.L. Stanley, 2005, p. 119).

The same could be said for the "The Bachelor," which in 2010 finished its 14th season strong with around 9 million viewers (Reiter, 2011). Despite a ratings slump in 2008 when "The Bachelor" was averaging only three million viewers, the show was able to avoid cancellation by changing the format. Instead of creating a brand new storyline with each new "Bachelor" series, the producers began using previous contestants to appear on the series. Starting in 2009, producers cast Jason Mesnick, a former "Bachelorette" contestant as the new "Bachelor." The new formula clicked with viewers, and the increased ratings helped the advertising revenue for the franchise nearly double, from \$89 million in 2007 to more than \$177 million for the 2009-2010 season (Steinberg, 2011).

According to author and former TV-network researcher Tim Brooks "The Bachelor's" success could be attributed to the fact that the show was the first of its kind. "When viewers get interested in a new program concept, they tend to stick with their 'first love' long after the imitators have faded" (Steinberg, 2011, p. 32). ABC continued the concept formula by casting a

former contestant from season 14 of “The Bachelor” as the star of the next installment of “The Bachelorette” which began airing in May 2010.

As the research presented has suggested, the makeover sub-genre was another successful category in the evolution of reality television. Shows such as “The Bachelor” and “Extreme Makeover: Home Edition” focused on dating and home remodeling, both of which displayed elements of the makeover category. Up until this point, the casting of the “ordinary person” was one of the main characteristics that defined the reality genre. But the genre would soon be rocked into an entirely new direction, and completely change the dynamic of the traditional TV family.



## Chapter 6: Celebrity

A music legend trying to work the remote control while disciplining his kids and cleaning up after the family pets, while TV cameras were capturing it all. This was a typical scene of a show that would help to develop and popularize another sub-genre in reality television; one that revolved around the life of a celebrity. Throughout the years, it was fictional families such as the Bradys (“The Brady Bunch”), Seavers (“Growing Pains”), and Huxtables (“The Cosby Show”) who were the stars of family television. But in 2002 reality was the hottest genre in the industry and it was a natural evolution for programs to be developed around the “real families” of well-known people. In a society where the public has always been fascinated with celebrity persona, reality TV evolving to celebrities seemed a natural fit (Meyers, 2009). The evolution of these celebrity sub genre helped to raise the curtain on the private lives of celebrities, had long been a fascination to the American public (Barron, 2010). Thus these types of programs become the focus of the fourth reality sub-genre as defined by the researcher: the celebrity category.

The main characteristics of the celebrity sub-genre were notoriety and lavish lifestyles. The famous person (and sometimes his or her family) was filmed while conducting everyday life. These celebrities usually had eccentric lifestyles and a lot of money, power and fame. Their celebrity status often attracted a variety of problems such as drug or alcohol abuse. Other dramatic characteristics of the celebrity sub-genre included tabloid scandals, family arguments, health issues, and problems with the paparazzi. Due to the racy topics, these reality shows mainly appeared on cable, but some were aired on broadcast networks as well.

Based on these characteristics “The Osbournes” best reflects this sub-genre. On March 5, 2002, MTV launched the reality comedy that followed the domestic life of heavy metal legend Ozzy Osbourne, his wife Sharon, and two of his children Jack and Kelly (Roman, 2005).

Although much of the language was censored due to the profanity, sensitive topics such as cancer and near death accidents were not. By its fifth episode the show was drawing in six million viewers, making it the highest-rated regular series in the music channel's 21-year-history; even beating the long running "The Real World" (Kompare, 2000).

In an interview with *USA Today* after the first season had aired, Sharon Osbourne seemed confident about the continued success of her family's reality show. "We've started this trend, not just on cable, but in family sitcoms on national TV, where they're swearing and bleeping it out," said Sharon, who offered no excuses or apologies for her family's on air behavior. She was quick to point out that it was "brutal honesty" that made "The Osbournes" unique. "Otherwise, it's not real and you get busted," she continued. "I always say to Ozzy, if you're stoned, say you're stoned, we have nothing to hide" (Edna, 2002, p. 01e). "The Osbournes" went on to air for four more seasons, helping to pave the way for future popular reality shows revolving around celebrities that have since flooded TV programming.

### **"The Osbournes:" A celebrity family reality show**

Eccentric rocker Ozzy Osbourne was best known for his heavy metal music and his wild drug and alcohol influenced lifestyle. His crazy antics, such as biting the head off a bat on stage made national news as the press dubbed Ozzy "insane" and "the mad man" (Reality bites the bat, 2002, p. 29). He has sold more than 100 million albums worldwide during his 40 years in the music industry but Ozzy became just as known for his wild personal life, which included numerous arrests, domestic violence, and battles with addiction (Waddell, 2009). One side of the rocker the world had never seen was Ozzy as a dedicated husband and father, but that was exactly how he was portrayed on his MTV reality show. It was the "pot calling the kettle black"

to watch Ozzy flip out when his daughter Kelly got a small tattoo, while he himself was covered in ink (Poniewozik, et al., 2002). MTV programming Chief Brian Garden appeared on *CNN Live Today* the day of the premiere and promoted the show as the first reality sitcom. “Like a sitcom, you have outrageous characters, very, very funny moments and the love between the cast members nonetheless” (Kompare, 2009, p. 111). The fact that Garden referred to the Osbournes as cast members was a reminder that the family’s relationships provided the premise for an entertainment television show.

The day to day life of the dysfunctional family made for great reality TV, and less than two months on air “The Osbournes” had tied ABC’s “NYPD Blue” for third place overall in its time slot (Castleman & Podrazik, 2003). The fact that a cable reality show was attracting the same numbers as a network primetime series suggested just how far the reality genre had come. In September 2002, “The Osbournes” won an Emmy Award for best reality series, further suggesting the popularity and validity of the celebrity sub-genre (The Osbournes captures Emmy, 2002).

### **“The Osbournes:” Influence on celebrity reality**

The overnight success of “The Osbournes” prompted MTV to quickly develop another reality show following a similar format, this time for newly married pop singers Nick Lachey and Jessica Simpson. “Newlyweds: Nick and Jessica” premiered in the summer of 2003 and documented the trials and tribulations of the young couple as they settled into their first year of marriage. The show an instant hit with viewers, thanks in part to the “dumb blonde” remarks made by Simpson during the first couple episodes: “Is this chicken or is this fish? I know it's tuna, but it says Chicken by the Sea” (Thomas, 2003, p. 02d). Part of the show’s allure was the

likeability of Simpson, who quickly embraced being labeled by the media as a “stereotypical beautiful dumb blonde” and used it to her advantage on camera. While the singers had enjoyed moderate success in their respective music careers, the success of “Newlyweds” turned the couple into household names.

With the evolution of the celebrity category, everyone from musicians to socialites to *Playboy* bunnies had begun pitching ideas for their own reality show. MTV and E! were two of the first cable networks to find commercial success with the celebrity sub-genre, with others not far behind. In 2003, MTV followed up the success of “The Osbournes” and “Newlyweds” with Ashton Kutcher’s “Punk’d” a hidden camera show which played pranks on unassuming celebrities. E! found success with “The Anna Nicole Show,” (2002), “The Gastineau Girls” (2004), and “The Girls Next Door” (2005). A&E had “Growing up Gotti” (2004) and “Gene Simmons Family Jewels” (2006). UPN had “Britney and Kevin: Chaotic” (2005) and Bravo had “Being Bobby Brown” (2005). All of these programs followed the same documentary style as most other reality shows with the creation of "storylines" for the celebrity, who was basically playing a character version of themselves. It seemed every cable channel had jumped on the bandwagon when it came to the celebrity sub-genre, but surprisingly one held back, although one would never know it based on the amount reality shown on the channel today.

VH1 was always regarded as more of an adult version of its sister channel MTV; in the early 1990s the network had rebranded itself as “VH1: Music First” and began airing programs such as “Behind the Music” and “Legends” (Curtis, 2006). But by 2005, the network had embraced the current trend of celebrity reality TV with shows like “Celebrity Fit Club,” a “Biggest Loser” for celebrities, and “The Surreal Life,” similar to “The Real World.” The network dubbed the new portion of programming “Celebreality.” VH1 also found its “family

sitcom” answer with “Hogan Knows Best,” which featured the domestic life of pro-wrestler Hulk Hogan, his wife Linda and their two teenage kids Brooke and Nick. "There are so many shows following around celebrities, you have to look for a unique dynamic," said VH1 Programming chief Brian Graden (Levin, 2005, p. 01d). “Hogan Knows Best” was the highest-rated series premiere in VH1 history with 2.7 million viewers, further establishing the popularity of the celebrity family sitcom (Oldenburg, 2006).

Over the years, VH1 had developed reality shows for celebrities from every area of the entertainment world, including musicians Flavor Flav and Bret Michaels, 1970s television child actors Christopher Knight, Scott Baio and Danny Bonaduce, and even major athletes such as Terrell Owens and Jose Canseco had crossed over into “celebrealty.” But in the summer of 2009, the network was plagued by scandal, as Ryan Jenkins, a contestant on two of the network’s reality shows, was found dead in Canada, just weeks after he was accused of killing his ex-wife in Orange County, California. One of the reality shows that featured Jenkins, “Megan Wants a Millionaire,” had recently premiered while the other was in post production. VH1 quickly cancelled both shows but not before coming under intense media scrutiny for allowing someone like Jenkins, who has a criminal record, onto their programming (Stelter, 2009). VH1’s president Tom Calderone had this to say to *The New York Times*, [The “celebrealty” strategy] “has given us an opportunity to define what VH1 stood for and still stands for, as one of our buckets, but it isn’t the overall riding definition of what we are anymore” (Stelter, 2009 p. 1 ). However, during the same time period, “celebrealty” accounted for 18 hours out of the network’s 21 primetime hours. A year later Calderone announced that the network planned on shifting away from certain reality programming. “As much as they’ve enjoyed the ‘Love’ franchise, our audience was getting a little fatigued by all those manufactured reality shows” (Haggerty, 2010, p. 677).

### **“The Kardashians:” The next big celebrity family reality show**

As the previous research has shown, from every “grandfather” reality show would come the copycats and imitators. After the success of “The Osbournes,” many other celebrities began pitching similar formatted ideas to cable networks. While many were successful, research suggests that none had the commercial success as E!’s “Keeping Up with the Kardashians” in 2007. The show was produced by Ryan Seacrest and featured the blended family of Olympic-medalist Bruce Jenner and his wife Kris, including the couples’ two young daughters, and the four grown children Kris Jenner had with her ex-husband the late Robert Kardashian. Before losing his battle with cancer in 2003, Kardashian was a high-profile California attorney whose cases included the murder trial of then family friend O.J Simpson.

In the beginning, the show revolved around 27-year-old Kim, who at the time was mostly famous for hanging out with fellow socialite Paris Hilton and a scandalous sex tape that had been leaked to the press. Viewers tuned in to watch Kim and her sisters, 28-year-old Kourtney and 23-year-old Khloe balance their personal and professional lives, which included owning and managing their clothing boutique D.A.S.H. Despite growing up in a privileged Beverly Hills lifestyle, Kim insisted that her parents instilled a strong work ethic in their children. “My parents’ mentality was like, okay at 18 you’re going to get cut off and I always felt like I was lazy if I wasn’t working,” Kim stated in an *Entertainment Weekly* article (Jensen, 2010, p. 43).

“Keeping Up with the Kardashians” was an instant hit for E! during the fall of 2007, and the network’s executive vice president of original programming Lisa Berger quickly announced plans for a second season. “Seacrest and Bunim-Murray’s [Productions] unique ability to capture the family’s one-of-a-kind dynamics and hilarious antics has made the series a fantastic addition

to our prime time line-up,” (Claustro, 2007, p. 1). Soon the series became the most-watched show in the history of E! and began its fifth season on Aug 22, 2010 (Jensen, 2010).

### **Low points: they lived happily ever after...for a while**

Around the same time the “Kardashians” were taking off, some of the celebrities behind these reality shows were beginning to burn out almost as fast as they had shot to stardom. The perfect blend of marital bliss often portrayed on a celebrity reality show did not always match what was actually happening behind closed doors. After months of denying tabloid reports of a troubled marriage, Jessica Simpson and Nick Lachey finally announced their plans for divorce in 2005. Although Simpson later told *People* magazine that she had no regrets, she admitted the couple’s MTV show had put a strain on the marriage, which in turn added to the heartache. “It’s one thing to have your marriage fail, but then there’s another thing to have the entire world watch your marriage fail” (Bartolomeo, 2008, p. 110).

By 2006 two other celebrity couples had also split after allowing cameras into their homes. Blink-182 drummer Travis Barker and former Miss USA Shanna Moakler had starred in MTV’s “Meet the Barkers” for two seasons before announcing their divorce; and MTV’s “Til Death Do Us Part” rocker Dave Navarro and actress Carmen Electra parted after three years of marriage. Even before the split Navarro challenged the authenticity of celebrity reality shows, including his own, claiming the presence of the cameras would influence certain behaviors. “So you end up getting the most realistic portrayal of your life with eight guys with cameras around” (Moss, 2004, p. 1).

Adding to the growing list of celebrities whose relationship crumbled after the cameras were gone was Britney Spears, who filed for divorce from husband Kevin Federline in 2006

shortly after the birth of their second child. Divorce was also on the horizon for Hulk Hogan and his wife Linda, which also played out in the media and tabloids. The popularity of VH1's "Hogan Knows Best" kept the family in the spotlight when a near-fatal car crash involving son Nick resulted in jail time.

The controversy and fame that surrounded actress and model Anna Nicole Smith seemed perfect for a reality show that would focus on her everyday life, one that included a marriage to a Texas billionaire 63-years her senior which resulted in a lengthy Supreme Court battle over his estate (ABC News, 2005). "The Anna Nicole Show" aired on E! from 2002 until 2004 and in 2006 Smith gave birth to a baby girl. But three days later, tragedy struck as Smith's 20-year-old son Daniel died of an apparent drug overdose. Smith herself died less than six months later as a result of an accidental drug overdose.

It will never be known if reality television contributed to the tragedies in the lives of these celebrities. But these examples could suggest that the fame and attention these reality celebrities sought by allowing cameras into their homes could be a double-edged sword; one that could help tear a family apart in front of the public. The fact that almost all of the above mentioned incidents took place around the same time leaves many to wonder, sheer coincidence or curse?

### **High points: One big happy dysfunctional family**

Luckily for the superstitious, reality television was not the kiss of death for every celebrity couple, most notably the grandfather of the sub-genre "The Osbournes." The national exposure cause by the show did not create a rift between family members, but instead provided an opportunity for future successful ventures. Sharon Osbourne went on to become involved in



other reality programs: a judge for NBC's "America's Got Talent," co-host for the new CBS daytime show "The Talk" and contestant on "The Celebrity Apprentice." She also wrote three best selling books all while continuing to manage husband Ozzy's musical career. Daughter Kelly's resume included stints in music, acting and writing, but in 2009 once again found fame in reality TV when cast in season nine of "Dancing with the Stars" (Eng, 2009). Kelly became a surprise favorite among both the viewers and the judges, and made it to the finals where she placed third. The dance competition helped Kelly to weight loss and after years of struggling with her body image and drug abuse, she credited the ABC show for helping to transform her life. "I wake up happy every single day," Kelly told *People* magazine. "I went through a horrible patch in my life but I had to go through that in order to be like this" (Aradillas, 2009, p. 112). Kelly then went on to co-host the E! show "Fashion Police" with veteran TV personality Joan Rivers.

Similar to the success of "The Osbournes," the Kardashian family used the success of their reality show as a launching pad for further fame and fortune. Matriarch Kris Jenner began building a franchise in the entertainment industry; as the Kardashian name became associated with books, fragrances, clothing lines and skin care products just to name a few. "Keeping up with the Kardashians" produced two successful spinoffs which followed the chronicles of Kim and her sisters as they expanded their Los Angeles based clothing store D.A.S.H. "Kourtney and Khloe Take Miami" debuted in August 2009 and averaged 2.7 million viewers, making it the highest rated series debut on E! since the premiere of "The Anna Nicole Show" in 2002 (Seidman, 2009). "Kourtney and Kim Take New York" began airing on E! in January 2011 and shortly afterward the network announced plans for a third spinoff with newlyweds Khloe and her husband NBA player Lamar Odom (Bizzoco & Dolor, 2011). Although having their own reality

show was the kiss of death for many Hollywood couples, Khloe Kardashian seemed confident that her marriage would be different. “You can say that reality television show families, like the Gosselins or the Hogans, all these people, their families break up,” Khloe stated in an interview to “Access Hollywood.” “This show has made [my family] closer and stronger, because it does make you spend time with each other, and also, this show is therapy to us” (Access Hollywood, 2011). The reality series may have been therapy to the Kardashian clan, but it also helped earn the family big bucks. According to the *Hollywood Reporter*, the paycheck for each episode of their reality shows was in the six-figures, and in 2010 the family earned \$65 million which was more than major movie stars such as Tom Cruise, Angelina Jolie or Sandra Bullock combined (Smith, 2011).

The lucrative business of the celebrity sub-genre on cable channels soon expanded to the major primetime networks. In 2003, Fox premiered “The Simple Life,” which featured social heiress Paris Hilton and her best friend Nicole Ritchie (daughter of Lionel Ritchie) as “fish out of water” living with an Arkansas family. The show generated laughs as the girls tried to adjust to their unfamiliar surroundings, as they carried their Louis Vuitton purses to work on a dairy farm, and “The Simple Life” was picked up for a second season (Lipton & Barnes, 2003). In 2005 ABC combined the excitement of ballroom dancing with the glamour of celebrities in “Dancing with the Stars.” The show had all the makings for a hit: competition, audience participation, and celebrities from all areas of the entertainment world. In 2006, the show recruited three-time Super Bowl champion Emmitt Smith for the third season. Smith proved football players could also be light on their feet, as he waltzed his way into the finals, eventually winning the entire competition (Dance floor touchdown, 2006). The magnitude and variety of celebrities who were actively participating in reality TV helped to validate the popularity and acceptance of the

celebrity sub-genre in all aspects of the television industry, which also helped establish other forms of unscripted programming.

### **The celebrity sub-genre: Helps cable channels expand**

Reality TV proved to be a successful addition to cable channels that were looking for ways to compete with the major networks for ratings. As stated before, reality's low cost rate was especially appealing to cable, and advertisers were often drawn to the upbeat content of shows like TLC's "Trading Places." "Advertisers want to be part of a safe environment," said Amy Baker, VP of Discovery Solutions, a division that puts partnerships together for Discovery Networks (T.L. Stanley, 2004, p. S-12). Research showed that edgier controversial reality programs were usually reserved for the major networks, so the fact that advertisers were looking to play it safe when it came to content gave cable channels a huge advantage.

Throughout the decade, reality TV continued to offer cable the perfect solution for inexpensive, year-round programming on any topic imaginable. In 2004, Bravo's "Queer Eye for the Straight Guy" helped to push the boundaries of sexual orientation, which at the time the only other shows to do so were big budget scripted programs such as NBC's comedy "Will and Grace." The Fab Five makeover team from "Queer Eye" helped to popularize "metrosexuality" in the United States and was one of the first reality shows to revolve around openly homosexual men (Johnson, 2010). Bravo continued to strike reality gold with "Project Runway," "Top Chef" and "The Real Housewives" franchise.

Cable and reality became almost simultaneous, as showcased with the addition of a new cable channel Reality Central, which aired reality programming 24 hours a day. "This is not far-fetched because we already have cable channels that are just for travel, cooking, and home

improvement. The genre has established itself over the last few years. It may lose some of its luster, but reality television is not going away," stated telecommunications professor Dom Caristi of Ball State University (Reality shows round the clock, 2003, p. 8). As the University of Maryland's Doug Gomery pointed out, the landscape of modern television was far different from when three major networks dominated the airwaves from the 1950s to the early 1980s. Gomery, a professor of media history, said cable was now similar to radio: it provided a wide variety of choices with smaller audiences. That said, it helps to further understand the success of reality programming on cable. The second season premiere of MTV's "Jersey Shore" may attract 5 million viewers, and while that number is small compared to the network broadcasters, it was the highest-rated cable broadcast of 2010 (Haggerty, 2010, p. 677).

## **Conclusion**

By 2010, the celebrity sub-genre had become a permanent fixture in the landscape of reality television. Shows on just about every celebrity, or ordinary person or group that wanted to become a celebrity dominated the networks. Questions began to arise over just what made a "celebrity" a celebrity. And the reality genre was seemingly ready to answer that question, although its answers might be questionable. Regardless, this sub-genre of shows had a major influence on television programs and their content. It made it possible for anyone to become a star, to get that "15 minutes" of fame, and potentially become a brand for a cable or even a broadcast network. And with more and more celebrity reality shows arriving on TV every season, it shows no signs of stopping.

As these four chapters have demonstrated, reality television started out with some distinct ideas and categories that grew over this 10-year period. However, taking all this into

consideration, there are several major themes that emerge and that must be looked at to really get an understanding of how and what reality did over this time period. Examining these themes and ideas that emerge, including how some of these genres are changing and blending into each other reflect reality TV's larger influence on a changing media landscape.

## **Chapter 7: Discussion**

In 1992, reality TV was a novelty. In 2000, it was a fad. In 2010, it is a way of life (Poniewozik, 2010, p. 93). This thesis has examined the evolution of reality television and how most programs can fit under the researcher's four sub-genres: challenge, talent, makeover and celebrity. In 2000 when the reality trend began to successfully develop on broadcast primetime TV, it was easy to classify each show into the above mentioned sub genres. But as the decade continued, reality programming genres began to merge and reflect characteristics of more than one sub genre. In addition, because the reality genre can easily overlap with other television genres, it can sometimes be difficult to define (Glynn, 2000). Looking at the history of the genre over the past ten game-changing years certain trends or themes seemed to emerge that could be seen as possible guides to the future of reality, if not all genres of American TV.

### **Competitive challenge & talent to feel-good reality**

According to numerous studies and research, "Survivor" was widely credited as the beginning of mainstream reality that hit the American airwaves in 2000 (Roman, 2005; Huff, 2006; Mittell, 2010). "Survivor" forever changed the television industry, and became the blueprint for the numerous reality competition programs to follow. Soon after "American Idol" emerged as the groundbreaking reality talent program in 2002. In that two-year time span, the majority of the reality programs developed such as "The Amazing Race" and "The Weakest Link" focused on winning a prize, either through physical sports themed challenges, or through the use of one's natural ability or performance. Either way the means to the end revolved around a contestant's "in-it to win-it" attitude. In order to succeed in competition and talent reality shows, a person had to rely on his or her own inner and physical attributes. As a result, others

were often hurt in the crossfire, but in these types of reality programs, that was the nature of the beast. But by 2003 the reality genre had expanded from these hard grinding themed programs to a softer more feel-good themed type of show. Research has suggested that this shift may have been a result of the changing social climate in the aftermath of September 11th.

In the early years of mainstream reality, the country suffered one of the greatest tragedies of the 21st century, with the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. That single event changed the world as we knew it, including how viewers watched and responded to entertainment television. Was it the shift in the atmosphere after the 9-11 attacks that helped in the development of more feel-good reality shows instead of ones that involved heavy competition? Frank Rich of *The New York Times* predicted that the TV audience would quickly lose interest for reality shows, and programs such as ABC's "The Mole" were in the bottom of the ratings in the weeks following the attacks (Shales, 2001a). But some cultural observers felt the change might only be temporary. "September 11 erodes the appeal of reality programming. I don't think it destroys it," said Neal Gabler, author of *Life: the Movie*. "A big draw of these shows was suspense," he went on to say. "Now, suspense is the last thing we want, we live in suspense" (Campbell, 2001, p. 2). TV producers such as Jonathan Murray, creator of MTV's "The Real World" agreed that the social climate in the nation might not have fit the reality format at the time, but that the genre was far from dead (Campbell, 2001). As the country began to its healing process, the "we-are-one" feeling shared by many Americans was reflected in a new wave of reality shows that fell under the makeover category.

According to Punyanutnt-Carter (2010), viewers watch these types of programs because they feel a connection to the person to the characters' transformation. As Rose & Wood (2005) suggested, viewers seemed to like to compare their own lives to those on reality TV. Reality

producers seemed to agree that the popularity of shows such as “Extreme Makeover: Home Edition” could be chalked up to good timing. “Two years ago, we couldn’t have sold these shows,” said Jay Renfore, a partner at the Hollywood production company Renegade 83. “It all goes in cycles, and this is the cycle we’re in now” (T.L. Stanley, 2005, p. 119). Andrew Glassman, an executive producer of “Three Wishes” agreed. “Just a few years ago, we were all trying to figure out what the next “When Animals Attack” would be, now we’re spending our time coming up with ideas about being nice to people” (T.L. Stanley, 2005, p. 119).

In the post 9-11 world while successful competition and talent shows such as “Survivor” and “American Idol” were still going strong, by 2005 networks were continually investing in new programs with a feel-good concept. “Reality shows don't have to be driven by contests, or by people out to get one another," said “Queer Eye for the Straight Guy" co-creator and co-executive producer David Metzler. "You can create a reality format that has a sweetness to it, where you give your protagonists opportunities to succeed rather than putting up obstacles for them to fail” (Hibberd, 2003, p. 23). These types of reality shows were also very attractive to advertisers. "Wish fulfillment shows are more content-friendly, family-friendly, advertiser-friendly," said Shari Anne Brill, VP-director of programming of the media agency Carat USA in New York. "Something humiliating and denigrating isn't as conducive an atmosphere to sell product in" (T.L. Stanley, 2004, p. S-12).

The feel-good trend of reality TV continued as the country faced another tragedy in August 2005, when Hurricane Katrina devastated the New Orleans area. Killing thousands in its wake, Hurricane Katrina was not only one of the worst natural disasters in U.S history, but was one of the costliest. Similar to the aftermath of 9-11, there was a tremendous outpouring of support from the American people, and an increased popularity for shows that helped



“makeover” the devastated region. Poniewozik & Keegan (2005) claimed TV shows such as “Extreme Makeover: Home Edition” and “Three Wishes” were a major part of the post Hurricane Katrina era they dubbed as “the year of charitainment” (p. 93). This era also included many celebrities such as George Clooney and Brad Pitt who used their stardom to help raise money for a good cause, which made them even more accessible to the public. Their efforts to help the victims as well as the “feel- good” emotions this brought to TV audiences seemed to increase celebrity interest and fascination among audiences and no doubt helped pave the way for the new slate of “celebrity” based reality TV programs. In 2005, the major networks broadcast celebrity telethons in order to help in the aid of Hurricane Katrina and according to Hollywood publicist Ken Sunshine celebrity involvement in events like these are crucial to maintaining a long-term career in the public eye. “Charitable work rounds out and humanizes our image” (Poniewozik & Keegan, p. 93).

### **From playing the part to playing themselves**

People are curious by nature, and the public’s fascination with celebrities, especially when they step forward to help after national disasters, is nothing new. But the charitable work done by celebrities is often overshadowed by their personal life. Many stars such as Angelina Jolie are heavily involved in humanitarian work, but in 2005 Jolie became much more known for her love life as rumors swirled about her off- screen involvement with co-star Brad Pitt, who at the time was still married to Jennifer Aniston (Tauber, Michael, Rodriguez, Mandel & Longsdorf, 2005). The constant media coverage of the relationship between Jolie and Pitt, commonly known as “Brangelina” further supported Meyers (2009) claim that the private lives of celebrities will attract more attention than their professional lives (p. 890). As claimed in his

book *Intimate Strangers: The Culture of Celebrity*, Richard Schickel (1985) suggested that the public's fascination with stars such as Jolie and Pitt is rooted in what one could call an illusion of intimacy constructed between the audience and the celebrity figure within celebrity gossip media. He also argued that television has helped to break down the barriers between the public and private lives of celebrities by bringing these larger-than-life personas into our living room. Today, some of these "larger-than-life" personas do not need to play a part to connect with the viewing audience; they can play themselves in reality TV.

The celebrity sub-genre also seemed to fit with Boorstin's (1961) concept of the "pseudo-event," which he argued is planned to achieve the maximum publicity, drama and public interest, and that celebrities themselves represented "human pseudo-events" (Barron, 2010, p. 39.) Celebrity reality television allowed viewers to learn private details about their favorite star. The popularity and high ratings of early shows such as "The Osbournes" and "The Simple Life" led to the development of many more similar formatted programs revolving around celebrities. From the start, there were some fans and critics who questioned the authenticity of certain reality programs, and the celebrity sub genre was no exception. During the first season of "The Simple Life," a show that had wealthy socialite Paris Hilton leave her big-city lifestyle and move in with an Arkansas family, Hilton made headlines when she claimed not to know what Wal-Mart was. Hilton later admitted she played up her ditzy blonde stereotype in order to make "The Simple Life" more entertaining. "I'm doing a TV show," Hilton told reporters after the season. "The things I do on the show, I know I'm being filmed" (Huff, 2006, p. 172). Other celebrities such as "The Apprentice" star Donald Trump argued that "what you see is what you get- television brings out your flaws, your weaknesses, your strengths and your truths" (Simon, 2005, p. 198).

The "is it real or not" debate, especially involving celebrities and reality show would

continue throughout the decade, as technological advances on the Internet such as Facebook, Twitter, interactive websites and blogs allowed viewers to get even closer to their favorite celebrity. This brought the idea of the celebrity as a more accessible, almost ordinary person into the television audiences' consciousness yet still allowed the public to retain its fascination with the star-making celebrities that seemed to be taking over both broadcast and cable networks. Two years before VH1 used the term "celebreality" to describe a portion of their programming, an article titled "Celebreality: The 'Stars' Are Elbowing Their Way In" ran in *The New York Times* on January 5, 2003. Television critic Joyce Millman had this to say about the topic: "Celebreality, the junk genre du jour, turns the notion of reality TV upside down. Instead of real people acting like celebrities on shows like "Survivor," "Big Brother" and "The Bachelor," celebreality gives us celebrities acting like real people on shows like "The Osbournes," "The Anna Nicole Show" and "Celebrity Boot Camp." Millman went on to say, "I'm using the term "celebrity" loosely here -- we're not talking about Russell Crowe, Julia Roberts and Dame Judi Dench eating bugs and scrubbing latrines" (Millman, 2003, p. 1).

By now, the sensationalism that filled the shows of the celebrity sub-genre could be compared to the popular variety show genre that ruled the airwaves in the 1970s; a showcase of famous people entertaining the audience (Edgerton & Rose, 2005) some of who were famous, basically for being famous. In contrast to the scripted format and larger-than-life celebrities distinct to the classic television shows from the "golden era," the modern day style of reality continues to blur the line between celebrity and the everyday individual (D. Olson, 2010).

## **From ordinary person to reality star to celebrity Is there even a difference anymore?**

With the passing of Elizabeth Taylor, Larry King said, “We lost the last of what can truly be called a star” (Tresniowski, Tauber, Chiu, Messer, Green, Leonard, & McNeil, 2011, p. 66). After a decade of reality television, the term “star” in Hollywood is thrown around much more loosely than in Taylor’s era. In today’s world, MTV’s “Jersey Shore” star Nicole “Snooki” Polizzi can rake in an astonishing \$32,000 paycheck for a speaking appearance at Rutgers University, offering students advice such as “study hard, but party harder,” and getting paid more than Nobel Prize-winning author Toni Morrison will when she delivers the commencement address (SNOOKIGATE!, 2011, p. 30). That is just one example of how reality television has gone from a being trend in 2000, to a globalized institution during the last decade. It also reflects the changing attitudes towards what or who actually is a “star” by Hollywood- or society’s standards, and what it takes to actually make it to that level.

Celebrity reality programming has captured both the fictional and non fictional worlds of the Hollywood culture, but as Simon (2005) argued, as much as viewers enjoy watching the lives of the well-known, they also like seeing an “average joe” on television (p. 179). That could be one explanation for the evolution of the “ordinary person” into “reality star,” and eventually into a celebrity living the lavish lifestyle once reserved for Oscar-winning actors. Reality programs such as MTV’s “Laguna Beach” and “The Hills” have helped catapult once unknown teenagers such as Lauren Conrad into household names. Conrad began living her life in front of the cameras in 2004 during her senior year in high school, and as a result gained fame and success as a fashion designer and best selling author. But most of all, Conrad became a TV personality and celebrity, leading to a job that has become a lucrative career choice. In 2009 “The Hills” stars made anywhere from \$65,000 to \$100,000 per episode. Another example of this is the increasing

number of “kids’ and parent” based reality shows, such as “Jon and Kate Plus 8” which became a sensation in the latter part of the decade. The Pennsylvania couple, who put themselves and their eight children in the national spotlight with a weekly reality show, earned more than \$75,000 per episode (Goldberg, 2009). This ordinary family’s show soon became one of the most talked about reality shows of its time and turned the couple into celebrities, or at least Kate, who despite divorcing Jon, continued the family reality series re-named ‘Kate Plus 8’ and had a stint on “Dancing with the Stars.”

With fame and fortune now seemingly to be the result of reality TV, the research suggests this genre will continue to have a dramatic impact on pop culture (Huff, 2006). In addition, the idea of creating a celebrity from an ordinary person-by seeing it all play out on a TV show, is gaining popularity as evidenced by the most recent crop of shows about ordinary people and their lives, such as “Sister Wives” and “19 Kids and Counting.” However, in recent years, these types of “family shows” have come under fire, and not just from critics, but from law enforcement as well.

In 2009, the Heene family from Fort Collins Colorado, who had once been featured on ABC’s “Wife Swap,” made national news when they reported that their six-year-old son Falcon had drifted off in a balloon. The story turned out to be an elaborate hoax; a publicity stunt devised by the boy’s father Richard Heene, who was desperately trying to get his family their own reality TV show. Heene and his wife did find the “15 minutes of fame” they had so craved, but for all the wrong reasons. According to the Fort Collin police, an estimated \$50,000 was spent in an attempt to rescue the little boy, who was in a hiding spot the entire time. As a result, Heene and his wife were arrested and served jail time (Samuelson, 2009) and the “balloon boy” incident contributed to a heated debate in the media regarding child exploitation in reality TV.

Parents Jon and Kate Gosselin had been accused of violating Pennsylvania child labor law due to their kids' work on their TLC reality show, which resulted in a state investigation (Duke, 2009). In 2010 TLC premiered "Sister Wives," which featured a polygamous family from Utah. Soon after the premiere, Kody Brown, his four wives and combined 16 kids became the focus of a bigamy investigation by local law officials (Utah, 2010). Experts warned of the psychological impact on the young children featured on these family reality shows. "They are by definition a commodity in a profit-oriented business," said child psychologist Alan Zimmerman (Draper, 2009, p. 1). But the controversy that often surrounded these types of shows did not seem to deter viewers, and they continued to be a ratings boost for cable channels such as TLC and Bravo. Shows such as "Kate Plus 8" were also an example of how through the natural progression of reality television, programs were beginning to show elements of more than one sub-genre. In 2000, an ordinary mother from Pennsylvania starring in a reality show was acceptable to viewers, as the decade came to a close, that "ordinary" had turned into something else (Barron, 2010).

### **The four sub-genres begin to merge**

In addition to the changes in the themes and types of reality programming, another trend is also noted as the programs move throughout the decade. At the start, most reality programs could be classified rather neatly under the four self-created sub-genres. But as the evolution continued, reality programs began to show characteristics of more than one sub-genre. For example "The Biggest Loser" combined a makeover format with a competitive boot-camp approach in order to achieve total body transformation (Lewis, 2008). "Dancing with the Stars" combined competition, ordinary professional dancers and celebrities. In 2003, NBC attempted to revive "Battle of the Network Stars" (1976-1988) by airing a two-hour special which served as

the pilot for a new version of the series. The new format consisted of NBC's own network stars such as "Days of Our Lives's" Drake Hogestyn and "Las Vegas's" Ali Landry, but the show failed to become a regular series. Two years later the show would be revamped once more, reflecting the current reality television trend. In August 2005, the NBC Universal-owned Bravo began airing "Battle of the Network Reality Stars," which featured previous contestants from hit reality shows such as "Survivor," "American Idol" and "The Bachelor" (Lafayette, 2005). Even with fan favorites such as Richard Hatch and Sue Hawk, "Battle of the Network Reality Stars" only lasted six episodes, but one could argue the show's format was a template for future reality "all star" type shows. In 2008, NBC attempted to boost its Thursday night ratings with the debut of "The Celebrity Apprentice," which combined the same competitive format as before, but added celebrities as the contestants. "This revved up installment of "The Apprentice" has been a game changer for the series," stated Craig Plestis, NBC Entertainment Executive Vice President of Alternative Programming. "As the rest of this season unfolds, you just keep watching, these episodes have been more thrilling than any season before" (You're Hired, 2008).

Celebrity editions of established reality programs have also become a popular trend, as favorite contestants from previous seasons are constantly brought back to try again on such shows as "The Amazing Race: Unfinished Business" and "Survivor: All Stars." Some of these competitive reality shows also began to also show characteristics of the makeover dating sub-genre. In 2004 former "Survivor" contestants "Boston Rob" and Amber, each from different seasons, were cast together in "Survivor: All Stars." Viewers watched as the unlikely pair first formed an alliance, and then began to fall in love. During the live season finale, Rob surprised 25 million fans when he proposed to Amber, who also went on to win the \$1 million prize check. Host Jeff Probst was as surprised as everyone at the show's added romantic twist. "And we're

not even a dating show,” laughed Probst. “Nobody expected this” (Tresniowski, Gliatto, Wang, Bonawitz, Chiu, Dagostino, Fowler, & Howard, 2004, p. 102). One could argue that if the widely recognized grandfather of reality television “Survivor” could successfully combine characteristics of more than one sub genre, then the trend would continue as we moved into the future of reality TV.

### **Social shifts, technology, money & reality TV**

Along with all the above, there is also a definite social shift in the content and overall topics that reality shows cover. In the 21st century, television has become more centered on the concerns of everyday living and the social issues affecting it (Lewis, 2008). The fictional premises that dominated the airwaves in the 1980s slowly began to shift towards people’s private lives and relationships as a major form of entertainment. Reality shows were key in moving this trend along, with the early ones focusing on “unscripted” plots that featured ordinary people. They also were inexpensive to produce, filled a lot of program hours and helped the broadcast networks compete with cable channels for viewers during a time of heavily increased program choices.

At the same time, new technology associated with the television industry was affecting the advertising industry. The popularity of TiVo and DVRs made it easy for a viewer to fast-forward through a traditional 30-second commercial but reality programs made it easy for building product integration into storylines (Brunelli, 2008). As a result, product placements were used in 75 percent of primetime network shows in 2005 in hopes of bringing in the revenue that was lost thanks to the ability of the viewer to skip ads (McDonnell & Drennan, 2010). New technology also affected the content of the programming itself. Phillip Swann argued in his book



*TV.Com: How Television is Shaping Our Future* that today's viewer needs constant gratification and that there are few occasions where people watch an entire show without interruptions; that the concept of "appointment television" where one arranges to be home at a certain time to watch a particular show is slowly becoming obsolete (Jenkins, 2009, p. 353). In addition, reality programs do not often require an intense, season long viewership to understand what is going on. You can easily tune in and out of reality programs and most likely, quickly catch up on the current plot twist or storyline. This trend is something that program creators are very aware of and most likely factors heavily into the content of the reality programs they create.

Reality TV and its popularity also reflected the economic trends in the country as they changed over these ten years, especially in the later half of the decade. In 2008 when the economy crashed, reality producers created shows such as A&E's "Pawn Stars" and "Storage Wars," which reflected the hard times that many Americans faced. Both were shows that capitalized on quick ways to make money for people who were in need of some cash. In addition, two networks have now developed reality programs which feature entrepreneurs competing for money to support their business ideas in NBC's "America's Next Great Restaurant" and ABC's "Shark Tank" (Carter, 2011). The "anything is possible if you work hard enough" theme of these two shows once more reflects the desire of those needing or wanting to succeed in a still suffering economy. "We think this area is a gold mine-where business hits reality television," said Paul Telegdy, the executive in charge of reality programming for NBC. "Wealth creation and the concept of capitalism are things that are inherently top-of-mind in America" (Carter, 2011, p. 1).

Economics also have a lot to do with the success of reality television. As stated before, reality is much cheaper to produce than scripted programs. An early indication of its powerful

impact came in 2001, when “Survivor: Africa” won the ratings race against the hugely popular and established “Friends.” The huge bonus for CBS was that “Survivor” cost less than one-fourth the price of “Friends” for which NBC paid around \$5 million an episode, the most expensive half hour of network television at the time (Carter, 2001b). That accomplishment proved that low cost could equal high success in television programming, and no one benefited more from reality’s inexpensive production cost than cable networks. According to Doug Gomery, a scholar at the Library of American Broadcasting at the University of Maryland, shows such as TLC’s “Say Yes to the Dress” might only attract a small audience, but that audience was a valuable one when you incorporate potential advertisers seeking brides-to-be (Haggerty, 2010, p. 677).

### **Reality’s influence on mainstream TV**

The low production cost and high ratings of reality programming helped to make reality a successful, distinct and widely accepted form of television (Ouellette & Murray, 2009). In fact, a closer look at some of the current popular dramas and comedy programs on TV also seem to reflect successful elements founded and publicized by reality TV programs. These include how shows are filmed and the types of characters and dialogue that drives these shows. Several of TV’s biggest comedies currently on air have ditched the common sitcom characteristics such as “being filmed before a live studio audience” and the ever present “laugh track” According to Poniewozik (2010) “The Office,” “Arrested Development,” “Parks and Recreations” and “Modern Family” have mimicked the reality format of “confessional” interviews with the characters and a documentary style of filming (p. 92). Popular dramas such as “Law and Order” also took a page from reality TV with their “ripped-from-the-headlines” plots, which were based on actual events that were currently in the news. Fox Entertainment President Gail Berman also

claimed that scripted shows such as “24” saw a ratings boost when scheduled to air following a reality program such as “American Idol” (Berman & Wheat, 2003).

Reality has even influenced how product placement and other forms of advertising are now being incorporated into scripted programs. In the Fox hit action show “24,” (2002-2010) Keifer Sutherland’s Jack Bauer was often shown using an Apple Mac to crack computer codes, and driving a Ford Expedition while chasing down terrorists. In 2002, the Ford Motor Co. had signed a multi-million-dollar advertising deal with Fox’s “24,” and in 2009 Hyundai signed a similar deal (Crupi, 2009). Similarly, a 2004 episode of ABC’s “Desperate Housewives” involved a lead character taking a job as a spokesmodel for Buick, one of the show’s major advertisers (Lianne, 2005). Around the same time, CBS chairman Les Moonves predicted that soon up to 75 percent of all scripted, primetime network shows would incorporate product placement (Lianne, 2005, p. 30). Sure enough in 2009, the trend had increased by nine percent on cable and six percent on broadcast networks, as characters on sitcoms such as CBS’s “Gary Unmarried” were seen eating and raving about KFC’s new grilled chicken (A. Stanley, 2010). Many TV critics and insiders said scripted programs took their cue from reality shows such as “Survivor” and “American Idol,” two early shows which helped to popularize the advertising trend. “American Idol kind of made it cool to integrate your brands into programs,” said David Kaplan of Nielsen IAG in a *New York Times Upfront* article. “It was hard to avoid, it was prominently featured, and it was on a show that had more viewers than any other in the country” (Majerol, 2011, p. 20).

## Conclusion

As Hill (2005) suggested, the term reality TV sums up various types of programming in the television industry, but it does not differentiate between the different styles and formats within the genre (Hill, 2005, p. 55). The goal of this thesis was to examine that belief by looking at the history of the reality genre over through a very influential 10-year period. The historical analysis shows that while there are certain, unchangeable characteristics tied to specific reality programs, the overlap of these characteristics are becoming more popular and influential in the types of future reality programs that will be created. To help illustrate and understand this, four sub-genres of reality TV were created and defined to show their influence on the development of reality TV. Tracing these sub-genres through their seminal years, it becomes apparent that as time goes by, these sub-genres, while still used and applied to newly created reality shows, are beginning to mix characteristics to, one could argue, help create entirely new forms of reality TV.

This history helps us understand that today's reality programming is different than it was in 2000 when "Survivor" first helped bring the trend to primetime network television. As originally stated by the researcher, these four sub-genres had certain characteristics that helped to easily define particular reality shows such as "American Idol." But throughout the years, the reality sub genres have merged, and current popular programs such as "The Biggest Loser," "The Apprentice" and "Dancing with the Stars" show elements of each.

This research has laid out the historical evolution of the modern reality television genre and how it has affected different elements of the entire medium. The research presented here has supported the statement that all past and current reality shows from 2000 to 2010 can fit into one of the four self-created sub-genres, and that these sub-genres can provide a blueprint for

commercial and audience success that future television programs and the media in general could follow. However, the research has also suggested that towards the later part of the 10-year time period the four sub-genres have begun to merge together and current programs can show characteristics of each. This study of reality TV during the past decade could have implications for identifying how the styles, content, and viewer perception of different types of shows reflect the changing television and media markets in the future. An understanding of these sub-genres as the researcher defined them could have an impact on the future of not only reality TV, but different genres and types of programming in general.

It was Andy Warhol who once predicted in the 1960s that “everyone will be famous for 15 minutes” (Simon, 2005, p. 197). Reality TV seems to have proven that prediction true, although one could argue the genre has surprised its early critics by far surpassing that “15 minutes” over the past decade. As far as the future, many feel that reality TV “is never going to go away,” as stated by *Mediaweek* television analyst Marc Berman in the *CQ Researcher*. “It's not new, it's a staple and it's very valuable” (Haggerty, 2010, p. 677).

There is no way to predict if the reality genre will continue to dominate the American airwaves in the future and continue to help ordinary people seek that promised 15 minutes of fame, but if history and this research is any indication, one could argue that the genre is just beginning to develop and evolve. As long as there are producers willing to explore and exploit any topic, contestants willing to bear their souls on camera, and an audience willing to watch, the reality genre stands a very good chance of continuing its success into the future. Whether its competing for a million dollars, winning a record contract, finding love, making over one's home, or simply living the everyday life as a rock star, the once dubbed “passing fad” of reality TV has secured its place in the history of popular culture.

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