2009

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## Recommended Citation

Raphael, C. (2009). The political-economic origins of Reali-TV. In S. Murray & L. Ouellette (Eds.), Reality TV: remaking television culture, 2nd Edition. (pp. 123-140). New York: New York University Press.

1st edition published in 2004.

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# The Political Economic Origins of Reali-TV

## *Chad Raphael*

From the sea change in American television in the 1980s emerged a programming trend variously described as "infotainment," "reality-based television," "tabloid TV," "crime-time television," "trash TV," and "on-scene shows." The welter of terms created by television critics to describe these new programs masked their underlying connection as a response to economic restructuring within the industry. In this essay I offer a rough categorization of these programs, sketch the industrial context from which they emerged, and point to the economic problems they were meant to solve. I focus mostly on the distinctive conditions of prime-time series, putting aside made-for-TV docudramas and entire cable channels (such as Court TV) that may have similar production practices and genres.

Although my focus here is on political economy, rather than on textual or audience issues, I do not want to imply that these programs' cultural significance can be reduced to their relations of production and distribution. Yet without understanding the political and economic forces that drove the spread of this genre, textual and audience studies may risk reifying it as an expression of audience demand; or of their creators; or of a cultural, discursive, or ontological shift unrelated to the needs of those who run the television industry. If this genre exhibits a kind of textual excess, its emergence reflects a relative scarcity of resources for television production.

Among the swirl of neologisms, my preferred term for these programs is "Reali-TV," which points to the inseparability of the television industry's economic needs and how this genre represents reality.[1] This term stresses television's particular reasons for embracing reality shows, as opposed to claims about the spread of infotainment across the media. At the same time, this designation illuminates connections between seemingly different television programs (such as crime-time, tabloid TV, and on-scene shows) and avoids the high cultural bias implicit in the notion of trash TV. The term indicates not only how these programs make distinctive claims to represent the real but also their common impact on the realities of power and economic relations in the industry. Reali-TV, then, is an umbrella term for a number of programming trends that have rapidly expanded since the late 1980s across all hours of network schedules, first-run syndication, and cable.

Production practices common to most of these programs include extensive use of "actuality" footage of their subjects, whether these are police staking out a drug den or mom and dad yukking it up in front of the camcorder; reenactments of events, performed by professional actors, or by the people who experienced them, or a mix of both; a tendency to avoid the studio in favor of on-scene shooting, sometimes at the same place where the events they represent occurred; mixing footage shot by unpaid amateur videographers with that of professionals; appealing to the conventions of "liveness," and "immediacy" through on-location interviews, subjective camera work, and synchronized sound; and appropriating traditional conventions of news coverage, such as the use of anchors or hosts, remote reporting, and the pretense to "spontaneity." Studio-centered formats, principally game shows and confessional talk programming, are the obvious exceptions to these common practices.

These production techniques are combined differently in numerous Reali-TV formats, which can be distinguished according to how much each relies on nontraditional labor (for story development, writing, performing, and camerawork) and production inputs (such as sets, props, and costumes.) Some formats continue to depend mainly on professional labor and traditional inputs. The network newsmagazines—whose ranks have swollen in the past few years with the introduction of *48 Hours* and *Street Stories* (CBS), *Primetime Live* (ABC), *Dateline NBC*, and others—are still entirely professionally produced and employ the same mix of studio and location footage as the evening news. The same is true of tabloid TV shows (such as the syndicated *A Current Affair* or *Entertainment Tonight*), despite their unique representational strategies.

Several other Reali-TV formats use hybrid production techniques. Hidden-video programs (such as *Totally Hidden Video*), which enjoyed a minor resurgence in the early 1990s, rely on professional camera crews and actors maneuvering nonprofessional performers into embarrassing or humorous situations. So do experiment-based programs that place and observe nonactors in contrived living arrangements (*The Real World*) and increasingly add the element of competition for money and prizes (as in *Survivor* and *Fear Factor*). Crime-time and emergency response programs (*Rescue 911, America's Most Wanted, Unsolved Mysteries,* and the many imitators these shows have spawned on cable and first-run syndication) are shot and edited by professionals and introduced by a regular host. Yet they also may employ some amateur footage of disasters, as well as non-professional performers enacting their own rescues or crime experiences. These programs also take advantage of props, sets, and costumes provided by law enforcement authorities, corrections institutions, parole boards, and emergency medical crews. Clip shows (such as *The World's Wildest Police Videos* and other "World's Best/Worst/Most" programs) similarly mix amateur and professional video. Finally, home video programs (such as *America's Funniest Home Videos*) rely entirely on amateur footage that is professionally edited. This format depends most heavily on nontraditional inputs and labor, not only for "scripting," performing, and shooting the hijinks but also to do the work of studio audiences (who vote for the funniest video, for example). Before discussing how these techniques have lowered production costs, we need to examine the larger economic picture from whence they sprang.

## *Decline of the Networks: Webs Wane as Competition Climbs*

As a fiscal strategy, Reali-TV emerged in the late 1980s in response to the economic restructuring of U.S. television. Much of the restructuring story has been told by scholars and in the trade press: how the number of video distribution channels expanded rapidly, with the growth of cable, VCRs, the FOX network, and local independent stations; how the television audience was increasingly fragmented; how advertising revenues now had to be spread among a larger pool of distributors; and how this dilution of advertising spending created pressure on broadcasters and cablecasters to cut per-program production costs.[2] Less cited causes for production budget cuts included the high levels of corporate debt incurred by the big three networks after each was sold in the mid-1980s and advertiser-driven changes in audience-measurement techniques designed to identify specific market segments (the most notorious of these was the People-Meter, which yielded dramatically lower ratings for the networks).[3]

By the late 1980s, then, the economic picture of American television had become decidedly more crowded. If the networks remained in the foreground as the major economic force in the industry, the purveyors of cable, VCRs, and first-run syndication winked and beckoned viewers in the background. Advertisers and audience-measurement services busily tried to record who was watching what, how much attention they paid to the commercial breaks, and whether they were buying any of it. But to understand how Reali-TV emerged as a cost-cutting solution in this new economic environment of the late 1980s, we need to examine how increased competition in the distribution of television programming affected the sphere of production.

## *The Squeeze on Production: Ouch! Webs and Suppliers Feel the Pinch*

As television distributors fought over smaller advertising shares and shouldered more debt, program producers (network production arms, major Hollywood studios, and the few small independent production companies) all faced rapidly rising costs in the 1980s. For prime-time producers, the average cost of an hour drama soared to over $1 million per episode by the end of the decade, and costs were increasing by roughly 8 to 10 percent a year.[4] Prices were driven up primarily by "above the line" costs such as talent, direction, scriptwriting, music composition, computer animation, and location costs.[5] The star system for above-the-line labor became especially pronounced, as network programmers, agent-packagers, and production companies responded to the greater risks of capital involved in the creation of new shows by increasingly demanding names associated with a prior record of success. Greater demand for stars created an artificial labor shortage and inflated salaries for the lucky few.

These rising costs were accompanied by smaller per-show revenues, creating a squeeze on production companies' earnings from both sides of the ledger. Producers now had to accept smaller license fees for their programs than they had commanded from the networks before the new era of competition. The threatened networks were scaling back outlays, and cable network distributors and syndicators also lacked deep pockets for program purchases. In addition, changes in federal tax laws eliminated producers' investment tax credits, which often meant the difference between earning a profit and taking a loss on a program. Before the 1986 restructuring of federal tax laws, producers were able to deduct 6.7 percent of the cost of their productions from their federal tax bills. By the mid-1980s, caught between rising costs and lower network license fees, most producers could no longer make back their investments in first-run network showings. By 1986, producers were losing up to $100,000 per episode for half-hour shows and $200,000 to $300,000 for hour dramas.[6] Producers now were forced to deficit-finance their programs and cross their fingers in hopes the show would survive three network seasons, providing enough episodes for domestic and foreign syndication and a chance to recoup their initial investments.

## *Producers to Labor: Drop Dead*

Feeling the squeeze on profits, production companies and the networks initiated a series of cost-cutting strategies that translated into an attack on labor, mainly on below-the-line workers such as technicians, engineers, and extras.[7] The first move was a wave of staff cutbacks at studios and network news departments. In the mid-1980s, FOX cut 20 percent of its studio staff, Capital Cities/ABC cut 10 percent of its staff, and CBS cut 30 percent of its administrative staff and 10 percent of its news division. NBC resisted a 17-week strike by the National Association of Broadcast Employees and Technicians (NABET) in 1987, shedding 200 union jobs. By 1992, NBC had eliminated 30 percent of its news division through layoffs and bureau closings. Even network standards and practices departments, the much-derided self-censors of the broadcasting industry, faced the budget-cutting ax.

The second part of the cost-cutting strategy involved bypassing union labor, spurring an unprecedented wave of strikes by above-line and below-line labor unions and craft guilds. In the 1980s and early 1990s, the NABET, the Directors Guild, the American Federation of Musicians (AFM), the Screen Extras Guild (SEG), and the American Federation of Radio and Television Artists (AFTRA) all struck, while the Screen Actors Guild (SAG) struck twice and the Writers Guild three times. Above-the-line workers especially sought more residuals for the use of programs on new media and overseas. Lower-paid labor, such as members of the SEG, took a more defensive stand commensurate with their weaker bargaining power. The SEG strike ended with union members accepting a 25 percent wage cut, changes in overtime schedules, and the acceptance of producers' prerogative to hire more nonunion labor (the extras' bargaining position was hurt by SAG's refusal to merge with the less-powerful union or even to support its position in contract negotiations).

This increase in labor unrest was both a response to and a motivating force in attempts to break the power of the unions. As a result, producers exacerbated the long-term split in the Hollywood labor market between core workers (such as the successful SAG members who enjoy higher pay and more job security and who share management tasks and interests) and periphery workers (such as the SEG members, who have little job security, work part-time schedules, and endure far lower wages).[8]

Producers also responded to union demands by using nonunion Hollywood labor and shifting production to regions where cheaper labor was available, such as Canada and the "right-to-work" states of the U.S. South. These tactics cut across entertainment and news program production. Disney and MCA led the industry shift toward building studio complexes in Florida. The loss of the investment tax credit, which was only applicable to programs produced in the United States, helped spur a shift of production to Canada, where lower costs and more pliable unions could save $200,000 to $300,000 an episode for dramatic series.[9] In news programming, CNN and FOX led the way in producing with lower-paid, nonunion labor and by breaking down job classifications. Their "success" was increasingly imitated by the traditional networks. One former CBS executive noted that the lesson of CNN was "Break the unions!"[10] NBC appears to have the learned the lesson quickest, developing a 24-hour affiliate news service based in Charlotte, North Carolina, staffed with nonunion labor. Some FOX affiliates experimented with subcontracting their entire evening newscasts.

## *Survivor Economics: Reali-TV Fits the Bill*

Reali-TV shows gained currency in this environment of relative financial scarcity and labor unrest of the late 1980s. Economically, the genre fit the needs of producers and distributors alike for cheaper programming. These programs largely did away with higher-priced stars and union talent. In the early days, the only "name" actors on these shows were briefly seen as hosts.

More recently, a subgenre has developed that trots out minor celebrities and has-beens that come cheap to endure humiliating tests of their mettle, fighting each other in *Celebrity Boxing* or plunging themselves in vermin in *Celebrity Fear Factor.* In the crime-time/emergency shows, roles in reenactments of crimes and rescues have been filled by unknown actors and, sometimes, by the people on which the stories were based. In programs such as *Cops,* segments followed law enforcement officials in the course of their work, eschewing reenactments and the need for actors entirely. The home video and hidden-video programs likewise avoided professional union talent, as have more recent experiment-based shows. In bypassing more-expensive performers, program producers also escaped the grips of the Hollywood agents, who had come to occupy the role of program developers and packagers in the early 1980s, and who exacted considerable fees for their services.[11]

Producers of Reali-TV, particularly of the crime-time/emergency shows and home and hidden-video programs, led a wider industry move toward using nonunion, freelance production crews. The Arthur Co. offers a good example. In 1987 it lost the rights to produce the network prime-time drama *Airwolf,* after battling with the Writers Guild over cable royalties, then turned to producing low-budget, nonunion programs for syndication and basic cable. In 1991 Arthur Co. returned to prime time with *FBI: The Untold Stories,* a Reali-TV reprise of the bureau's long-running romance with the tube. Similarly, FOX's *America's Most Wanted,* one of the trendsetters of Reali-TV when it premiered in 1987, used different freelance crews for each segment. Even some newsmagazines, such as *CBS Street Stories,* turned to freelance camera crews and news producers. The home video programs relied on amateur camcorder enthusiasts and freelance professionals. Reali-TV producers also partook of the move to cheaper labor regions. Grosso-Jacobson Entertainment, a prolific creator of crime-time shows (including *Top Cops, True Blue,* and *Secret Service*), shot its patriotic paeans to America's law enforcers in Toronto.[12]

The genre has also been an integral part of network strategies to control labor unrest. The 1988 Writers' Strike, a 22-week affair that delayed the opening of the fall season, proved crucial to the rise of Reali-TV. Existing Reali-TV shows were largely unaffected by the strike, as they already relied very little on writers. In addition, the delay of the season gave producers and programmers the impetus to develop future shows that did not depend on writing talent. Tabloid TV pioneer Peter Brennan (of *Hard Copy*), when asked whether he was concerned about a potential SAG strike in 1992, shrugged off the threat: "Remember the Writers Guild strike in '88? . . . That was the year that gave rise to reality TV."[13]

The second wave of Reali-TV programming, ushered in by the ratings success of the game show *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire* in 1999 and *Survivor* in 2000, came amid threatened walkouts by writers and actors. The networks ordered more Reali-TV series in part to prepare for potential strikes and not simply because they could be produced without union employees. Reality series can be developed more quickly than fictional programs partly because they do not rely on lining up talent and writers. Newsmagazines can be expanded relatively easily to fill additional hours on the network schedule because news workers are typically affiliated with different unions than other television talent. "There is a quick turnaround time with reality," noted CBS President Leslie Moonves in detailing his network's plans for a possible writers' strike in 2001.[14]

Reali-TV programs also cut costs by wholeheartedly embracing low-end production values. Direct cinema techniques such as handheld cameras and the use of available lighting made shows without reenactments (such as *Cops* and the network newsmagazines) particularly cheap. Programs that employed reenacted material (such as *Rescue 911* and *Unsolved Mysteries*) often avoided traditionally painstaking lighting and makeup to approximate the "real" look of direct cinema footage and its relatively low production costs. Although reenactments required some expenses for on-location shooting, going on-scene was often less costly than renting studio space. In addition, crime-time and emergency shows minimized costs of sets, props, and costumes by convincing the agencies they profile to donate police cars, equipment, and even uniforms for the production crew, so they could pass for police at crime scenes.[15] Finally, research and logistical costs for most categories of Reali-TV shows are tempered by the information subsidies traditionally extended to the news and entertainment media by public relations operatives hoping to plant favorable stories about their corporate and government clients.[16]

As a result of their shoestring production budgets, prime-time Reali-TV shows cut production costs dramatically and recouped their makers' investments from network license fees alone. With rare exceptions, Reali-TV was the only category of prime-time programming that was not deficit-financed in the early 1990s (table 6.1 lists production costs for a representative season). In the same year, one-hour dramas and 30-minute sitcoms often lost $100,000 to $300,000 an episode. At a time when dramas routinely cost over $1 million per episode, and half-hour sitcoms cost $500,000 to $600,000 apiece, Reali-TV programs offered considerable savings in production costs, sometimes

TABLE 6.1

*Prime-Time Reali-TV Programs at the Start of the 1991–1992 Season*

| Program | Network | Minutes | Producers | Deficit | License Fee per Episode |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| *America's Funniest Home Videos* | ABC | 30 | ABC/Vin di Bona | $0 | $375,000 |
| *America's Funniest People* | ABC | 30 | ABC/Vin di Bona | $0 | $300,000 |
| *American Detective* | ABC | 30 | ABC/Orion TV/ Paul Stojanovich | $0 | $450,000 |
| *FBI: The Untold Series* | ABC | 60 | The Arthur Company | $25,000 | $450, 000 |
| *Primetime Live* | ABC | 60 | ABC News | $0 | $500,000 |
| *20/20* | ABC | 60 | ABC News | $0 | $500,000 |
| *48 Hours* | CBS | 60 | CBS News | $0 | $500,000 |
| *Rescue 911* | CBS | 30 | CBS/Arnold Shapiro | $0 | $650,000 |
| *60 Minutes* | CBS | 60 | CBS News | $0 | $600,000 |
| *Top Cops* | CBS | 60 | CBS News | $0 | $650,000 |
| *Exposé* | NBC | 30 | NBC News | $0 | $300,000 |
| *Real Life with Jane Pauley* | NBC | 30 | NBC News | $0 | $300,000 |
| *Unsolved Mysteries* | NBC | 60 | Cosgrove-Meurer | $0 | $800,000 |
| *America's Most Wanted* | Fox | 60 | STF Productions | $0 | $500,000 |
| *Cops* | Fox | 30 | Barbour-Langley/ Fox TV Stations | $0 | $325,000 |
| *Cops II* | Fox | 30 | Barbour-Langley/ Fox TV Stations | $0 | $325,000 |
| *Totally New Totally Hidden Video* | Fox | 30 | STF Productions | $0 | $500,000 |

*Source: Variety*, 26 August 1991, 48–54.

over 50 percent compared with fictional programming.[17] Reali-TV also enjoyed success in the low-fee first-run syndication and made-for-cable fields.

## *Deregulation: Reali-TV Right for Finsyn, Public Service Fights*

A changing regulatory climate also contributed to the economic advantages of Reali-TV. In 1970, amid concerns about network power over production companies, the FCC barred the networks from owning a financial interest in, and retaining syndication rights to, most prime-time entertainment programming (daytime shows, sports, and news were not affected). The financial and syndication, or "finsyn," rules also limited the number of hours of prime-time shows the network could produce. A 1980 consent decree in an antitrust case further limited network prime-time entertainment production to 2.5 hours per week for several years.

When the FCC enacted the finsyn rules, its stated goals were to encourage local programming and small independent producers. The FCC hoped that if network production were reined in, other producers might create more innovative, diverse programming. But the small independents did not flourish, as the large capital investments and risks required of program producers meant that Hollywood studios with substantial financing still controlled the field. As with the small independents in the film industry, television's smaller production houses depended on winning network contracts for their programming before they could secure bank financing to make it.[18] Independents did not exercise much financial or creative power over the development of new programming, especially when compared with the major studios or the top agent-packagers. In many ways, the same relations held in first-run syndication and the made-for-cable markets. Here, the small independents were often financed by large multisystem operators (such as AOL-Time Warner) and the dominant distribution companies (including those run by major studios) in exchange for syndication rights.

Throughout the 1980s, the networks challenged the finsyn rules, arguing that they were no longer in a position to dominate program distribution as they had before the spread of cable and VCRs, and that they needed to be allowed to compete internationally in the global television market. In April 1991, the FCC allowed the networks to finance and syndicate their own in-house or coproduced programs and to negotiate for the rights to some outside-produced shows. Hollywood studios and independent producers exhausted a long series of appeals, and the finsyn rules were repealed in 1995.

Although FOX has was exempt from the finsyn rules and always produced the bulk of its programming in-house, the three major networks may very well have anticipated the repeal of these restrictions and positioned themselves to syndicate Reali-TV programming domestically and abroad.[19] From the start, one of the striking characteristics of prime-time Reali-TV programs was that so many of them are network productions or coproductions (see table 6.1). This was true not only of the network newsmagazines, which are produced by their news divisions, but also of crime-time/emergency response and the home video shows. As producers and coproducers of the shows, networks could retain the rights to distribute them under the new rules.

Reali-TV has also played a role in the redefinition of public service programming. In the Reagan-Bush climate of lax regulation, programmers did not need to fear FCC scrutiny of the violence and sexual content of Reali-TV, avoiding the costs of in-house standards and practices departments' close screening of these programs, along with the potential legal costs of defending them before the FCC.

In addition, many Reali-TV producers recast broadcasters' "public service" and "educational" responsibilities to champion the civic value of their programs. Producers ignored traditional definitions of serving the public interest, which focused more on the discussion of public affairs, coverage of local issues, and developing children's intellectual or emotional abilities. Instead, the creators of crime-time programs in particular touted their public contribution as prompting citizens to help law enforcement officers track down their quarry. The executive producer of *America's Most Wanted* opined to the *FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin:* "I believe we are witnessing the birth of a new era in citizen involvement. *America's Most Wanted* has organized some 22 million viewers into the first nationwide neighborhood watch association."[20] In this vision of public service, surveillance and voyeurism replace debate over public affairs, an oxymoronic "nationwide neighborhood watch association" offers a false sense of localism, and education is reduced to instructing viewers about how to avoid becoming a crime victim.

The more recent crop of Reali-TV game shows and survival contests make far less pretense to public service, except for the network newsmagazines. These programs still purport to offer investigative reporting even as they abandon the kinds of subjects most in need of journalistic scrutiny. A recent study of four network newsmagazines found that over one-half of all stories focused on lifestyle, human interest, and celebrity news. Just 8 percent of reports were about politics, economics, social welfare and education.[21] As the newsmagazines began to compete with fictional and tabloid television programs, such as *Entertainment Tonight* or *Inside Edition,* all increasingly focused on the same topics. By 1997, there was little difference in story selection between the tabloid programs and the network newsmagazines, according to one television monitoring company. The runaway story of the year for both was Princess Diana's death.[22]

## *International Distribution: The Other Real World*

Producers and network investors have also been attracted to Reali-TV because of its ability to sell abroad. Because prime-time Reali-TV earns back its production costs with the first U.S. network showing, any further syndication represents pure profit. American Reali-TV has been sold overseas using two methods. Some shows are licensed outright to foreign broadcasters, the way most U.S. programming traditionally has been marketed. Episodes of the top-rated network crime-time/emergency programs *Unsolved Mysteries* and *Rescue 911* have been sold abroad in this manner. One international program distributor claims that "the easiest and most profitable thing for a distributor to do with reality shows is to license them as they are. Prices can even approach what distributors get for action-adventure hours in some territories."[23] By 1991, *Rescue 911* could be seen in Germany, Denmark, and Sweden; *Unsolved Mysteries* was available in Canada, Spain, France, and Japan.

Many more shows have been formatted because of their topical or local nature, however. This method involves selling or licensing the program's concept for local production with local subjects. American program footage may be sold as well to supplement the local version. "In syndication," notes one executive producer, "shows tend to be more topical and current . . . but they have to be more timeless for that backend revenue"[24] As Asu Aksoy and Kevin Robins note, the challenge for contemporary media distributors "is to transcend vestigial national difference and to create standardized global markets, whilst remaining sensitive to the peculiarities of local markets and differentiated consumer segments."[25]

Reali-TV has participated in this "glocalization" strategy. Fremantle, a distributor of game shows and *Candid Camera,* provides a good example of how formatting works. Fremantle's chief executive officer maintains that the company "operates in foreign markets like McDonald's does. . . . There are Fremantle subsidiaries in some countries; in others there are franchise-holders who produce their own local versions of the original product."[26]

Home-video and hidden-video shows tend to be formatted rather than licensed, allowing foreign broadcasters to insert their own clips into the programs. Crime-time shows have also been formatted. The Swedes developed a version of *Cops,* and *America's Most Wanted* was transformed into the short-lived *Australia's Most Wanted.* Tabloid TV programs and newsmagazines are especially likely to be formatted or customized because the appeal of their stories and journalists tends to be culturally specific. Newsmagazines, such as *60 Minutes,* often export stories after stripping them of their original graphics, voice-overs, journalists, and hosts so that local journalists can tailor the stories and insert themselves into them.[27]

Reali-TV's growth abroad, especially in Europe, was aided by the widespread movement to privatize and deregulate broadcasting. As one distributor put it in the early 1990s:

> With some exceptions, public service broadcasters have always kept a tight lid on the definition of reality. . . . The taste [for Reali-TV] has been stimulated abroad by increased commercialism, but reality shows haven't yet taken hold *en masse*. . . . But because foreign broadcasters are tight for money, the attraction of reality will no doubt be considerable.[28]

Although both private and public broadcasters have purchased Reali-TV, the genre's growth was especially symptomatic of the need for European public broadcasters to operate according to the logic of private channels, as competition for audiences and funding mounted.[29]

In addition, the explosion of distribution channels in the 1980s was not only an American phenomenon but a global one. Thus, some of the same cost pressures encountered by U.S. producers were being felt abroad. To better adapt to an unevenly globalizing television market, some Reali-TV has been conceived for international audiences first. Time Warner/HBO's *World Entertainment Report,* for example, was prelicensed across Europe, Australia, and Japan. The program had a modular format that broadcasters could recompose to fit their needs, inserting local entertainment coverage if desired.

The international spread of Reali-TV cannot be explained as the result of American product innovation because many European and Japanese programs predated their American counterparts. The top-rated American tabloid in the late 1980s and early 1990s, *A Current Affair,* was developed in Australia. *Crimewatch UK,* which reconstructs crimes and asks for viewers' assistance, preceded *America's Most Wanted* and *Unsolved Mysteries,* as did a similar Dutch program.

These transborder flows suggest that programs that appear to be products of rapid American innovation when glimpsed from the national perspective were actually the result of an increased international circulation, and recirculation, of products through globalized media markets. For example, the widely formatted *America's Funniest Home Videos* was itself inspired by segments of the Japanese variety show *Fun Television with Katochan and Ken-chan,* which broadcast humorous videos sent in by viewers. King World's early 1990s revival of *Candid Camera* for foreign and domestic syndication, an attempt to capitalize on the success of *America's Funniest Home Videos,* similarly indicated that there was as much recycling of program formats as rapid innovation at work in the growth of Reali-TV. Mark Burnett, a former parachutist for the British Army and the creator of *Survivor,* based the program on Swedish and Dutch models.[30]

If U.S. television has always mixed the shock of the new with the familiarity of the formulaic, Reali-TV's rise suggested that American producers looked further abroad for "new" ideas, then repackaged them for domestic and international audiences. To the extent that the spread of the genre represented a "victory" for U.S.-based media producers, it was largely a triumph of packaging and marketing.

## *What Price Reality?*

American television underwent a dramatic restructuring in the 1980s, largely precipitated by changing patterns of distribution with the spread of cable and VCRs. Audiences fragmented as these new forces challenged the networks' oligopolistic control over the distribution of television programming. Producers faced smaller license and syndication fees from an expanded customer base, which now included not only the networks but also local independent stations, cable networks and superstations, and first-run distributors. Confronted with rapidly rising above-the-line production costs, producers took it out on below-the-line labor and sought cheaper forms of programming. Reali-TV fit the bill.

In the early years, networks stepped in to produce examples of this programming that were permissible according to the FCC (news magazines for the big three, and all forms for FOX) and coproduced the kinds they were not allowed to own and syndicate under the finsyn rules until the rules were repealed. Reali-TV made a splash in Europe and Japan in the late 1980s and early 1990s as well, but many American programs of this kind that were licensed and formatted abroad drew on foreign models in the first place. This suggests that if American television turned to Reali-TV to solve its particular economic crisis, the industry both borrowed and exported abroad to do so, touching off a recirculation of products among global media corporations.

But Reali-TV has not always solved the economic problems it was meant to address. The genre declined for several years in the mid-1990s for several reasons. First, Reali-TV was not always successful in off-network syndication markets, as the genre's topicality and timeliness made it less attractive to audiences the second time around. *Unsolved Mysteries,* a top ratings winner in prime time, was one of the first such programs to be offered for syndication. Although it was sold to broadcast stations in reedited and often updated episodes, it was a financial disappointment to its producers before it found a home on the Lifetime channel, a cable network that could settle for smaller audiences. Similarly, reruns of the first season of *Survivor* did not attract strong viewership. "Reality shows have a short shelf life," one programmer noted; "they just don't seem to sell well in syndication."[31]

Under the old finsyn rules, when the networks could not take an ownership interest in most prime-time programs, executives did not have to worry about whether programs were attractive for syndication. Today, the networks produce and own most of their prime-time schedules, sharing the rewards but also the risks of investing in new shows. Thus far, the rewards have been few, as no network has produced a hit series that has sold well in syndication, although that is likely to change soon as the current crop of hit programs reach maturity.

Second, the genre's excesses drove away some advertisers that do not want to be associated with its tawdry image and generally lower-income audiences.[32] There have been public embarrassments, most notoriously FOX's *Who Wants to Marry a Multi-Millionaire*, in which a man picked his bride from the 50 women who auditioned on television for the job. FOX had to cancel the rebroadcast after news reports aired allegations of abuse by the groom's former girlfriend, raised questions about whether he was indeed a multimillionaire, and exposed the bride's claims to be a Persian Gulf War veteran as misleading. The on-air wedding was quickly annulled. Even more scandalous from advertisers' point of view, much Reali-TV has failed to attract affluent 18 to 35 year olds, appealing more to preteens, seniors, and low-income viewers. This is especially true of the tabloid programs, crime-time, and emergency programs. There are exceptions that draw more upscale viewers, such as *Survivor,* or young consumers, such as *The Real World,* but the genre's demographics have sometimes forced the networks to sell advertising time on Reali-TV shows at a discount compared with other programs with similar ratings and shares.[33]

Finally, a small legal backlash raised costs to some producers and limited their access to some of the most sensational types of footage.[34] Programs that rely on producers' ability to ride along with police or emergency workers and follow them into homes and ambulances have provoked a rash of suits for invasion of privacy. In 1999, the Supreme Court ruled that it was a violation of Fourth Amendment protections against unreasonable searches for media personnel to enter a home on the authorities' coattails unless aiding in executing a warrant. This is unlikely to curb ride-alongs but should discourage media entries into suspects' homes without permission.

Some producers may be affected by antipaparazzi laws that sprang up in the wake of Princess Diana's death in a high-speed car accident while fleeing photographers. California's law, for example, criminalizes the use of visually or aurally enhancing technology to capture sound and video in private places that would otherwise be inaccessible. The newsmagazines–indeed, any show that relies on personnel going undercover or using deception to get information–must take stock of the unsettled state of law in this area.

Many journalists were chilled by a 1997 jury award of $5.5 million to supermarket giant Food Lion in its lawsuit against an ABC *Primetime Live* undercover report that portrayed unsafe food handling and labor conditions at the chain. An appeals court later reduced the damages to $2 but upheld convictions of ABC on two counts. The networks' journalists, who got jobs at several Food Lion stores so they could gather hidden-camera footage behind the scenes, were found guilty of trespass and breach of loyalty (the latter charge was for gathering hidden-camera footage for the network while being paid by Food Lion as its employees). The case is one of several that have cast doubt on some uses of deception and hidden cameras.

Nonetheless, Reali-TV is still with us and is not likely to go away. Television broadcasters now must compete with cable channels by airing new series all year round. The return of labor-management strife in Hollywood, including the 2007–2008 Writers Guild of America strike, has recently sparked a resurgence of reality programming. As long as the networks' desperately need to fill the hours around expensive dramas and sitcoms with cheaper programming, to offer new fare throughout the year, to sell in international markets, and to control labor, they will provide us with their peculiar brand of reality.

## NOTES

1. The earliest use of this term I have encountered is in Ed Siegel, "It's Not Fiction, It's Not News. It's *Not* Reality. It's Reali-TV," *Boston Globe,* 26 May 1991, A1.

2. For example, Ken Auletta, *Three Blind Mice: How the TV Networks Lost Their Way* (New York: Random House, 1991).

3. John Downing, "The Political Economy of U.S. Television," *Monthly Review* 42 (1990), 30–41.

4. Harold L. Vogel, *Entertainment Industry Economics: A Guide for Financial Analysis,* 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 171.

5. Patricia Bauer, "Production Scene: Hollywood's New Low-End Market," *Channels* 6 (1986), 14.

6. Ibid.

7. The discussion of staff cutbacks and strikes at the networks draws on Downing, "Political Economy of U.S. Television," 37–38, and J. Max Robins, "Hired Guns Take over Local News," *Variety,* 24 September 1990, 21.

8. On core and periphery labor forces in the Hollywood entertainment industry, see Susan Christopherson and Michael Storper, "The Effects of Flexible Specialization on Industrial Politics and the Labor Market: The Motion Picture Industry," *Industrial and Labor Relations Review* 42 (1989), 331–47.

9. Bauer, "Production Scene," 14.

10. Quoted in Downing, "Political Economy of U.S. Television," 39.

11. On the role of agent-packagers, see Todd Gitlin, *Inside Prime Time* (New York: Pantheon, 1983), 143–57.

12. On the Arthur Co., see Bauer, "Production Scene," 14. On *America's Most Wanted,* see Daniel R. White, "America's Most Wanted," *ABA Journal,* October 1989, 94. On *Street Stories,* see J. Max Robins, "Producers for Hire," *Variety,* 24 February 1992, 81.

13. Quoted in Robins, "Producers for Hire," 81.

14. Quoted in Paula Bernstein, "CBS Set for Strikes with News, Reality," *Variety,* 16 March 2001, 1; see also Josef Adalian and Michael Schneider, "FOX Strike Protection: Reality," *Variety,* 11 August 2000, 5.

15. Scott A. Nelson, "Crime-Time Television," *FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin,* August 1989, 5.

16. On the role of information subsidies in news selection, see Oscar H. Gandy Jr., "Information in Health: Subsidised News," *Media, Culture and Society* 2 (1980), 103–15.

17. Economic data in this paragraph are from "1991–1992 Primetime at a Glance," *Variety,* 26 August 1991, 48–54.

18. On the constraints faced by "independent" film producers, see Asu Aksoy and Kevin Robins, "Hollywood for the 21st Century: Global Competition for Critical Mass in Image Markets," *Cambridge Journal of Economics* 16 (1992), 1–22.

On the similar financial dependence of small television producers, see Vogel, *Entertainment Industry Economics,* 117; Gitlin, *Inside Prime Time,* 136.

19. The finsyn rules were not applied to FOX as the FCC did not define it as a network because it distributed fewer than 15 hours a week of programming.

20. Quoted in Nelson, "Crime-Time Television," 8.

21. Committee of Concerned Journalists, *Changing Definitions of News,* April 1998, at http://www.journalism.org/ccj/resources/chdefonews.html. See also Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel, "Are Watchdogs an Endangered Species?" *Columbia Journalism Review,* May–June 2001, at http://www.cjr.org/year/01/3/rosenstiel.asp.

22. Aaron Barnhart, "Lawrence Company Has Its Finger on the Pulse of TV Topics," *Kansas City Star,* 10 January 1998, E4.

23. Quoted in Elizabeth Guider, "Yanks Deal for Real," *Variety,* 3 June 1991, 35.

24. Quoted in James McBride, "'On-Scene' Shows Flood Airwaves," *Variety,* 3 June 1991, 32.

25. Aksoy and Robins, "Hollywood for the Twenty-First Century," 18.

26. Quoted in Guider, "Yanks Deal for Real," 1.

27. Clay Calvert, *Voyeur Nation: Media, Privacy, and Peering in Modern Culture* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 2000), 102.

28. Quoted in Guider, "Yanks Deal for Real," 75.

29. Graham Murdock, "Television and Citizenship: In Defence of Public Broadcasting," in *Consumption, Identity, and Style,* ed. Alan Tomlinson (New York: Routledge, 1990), 77–101; Paddy Scannell, "Public Service Broadcasting: The History of a Concept," in *Understanding Television,* ed. Andrew Goodwin and Gary Whannel (New York: Routledge, 1990), 11–29.

30. Edward D. Miller, "Fantasies of Reality: Surviving Reality-Based Programming," *Social Policy* 31 (2000), 10.

31. Quoted in John Dempsey, "Hot Genre Gluts TV Market," *Variety,* 3 June 1991, 32.

32. Michael Schneider, "True Believers: Nets Reap Ratings from Reality Shows," *Variety,* 12 November 1999, 1.

33. Steve Coe, "Reality 1994: 'The Reality Is That [Some Network] Reality Bites," *Broadcasting and Cable,* 9 May 1994, 30.

34. The discussion in this paragraph is based on Calvert, *Voyeur Nation,* 133–206.