

When Will I Be Famous?

Reality TV, Privacy and the Price of Celebrity

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SOSC 3316 6.0 A Tutorial 05

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May 31st, 2004

“What they won’t see are the hidden microphones and infrared cameras at the watering hole and along the beach. In addition to the hand-held cameras and boom mikes that will be in their faces, this array of unseen recording devices will document their every move... The castaways won’t have a moment’s privacy, even in the jungle... The inevitable nervousness and reluctance to reveal their true selves on camera will disappear as the cameras become as familiar to their daily lives as breathing. Only then can the true range of human personality dynamics – the love and hope and sex and dreams side of life – come forth.”

- Mark Burnett, Survivor: The Official Companion Book to the CBS Television Show

“What would you do for a million dollars?”

- ‘Boston’ Rob Mariano, Runner-Up, *Survivor: All-Stars*

I visited Las Vegas in November of 2004 for my wedding, as well as the week before, and in all of the planning; one of the matters of primary importance was how my friends and I could watch one of the last episodes of *Survivor: Pearl Islands*. Within a day of arriving, we’d found that the Barbary Coast had *Survivor* on the big screen, and gathered there on Thursday with a sizable crowd who’d chosen to ignore the free drinks and gaming action for the televised drama of sixteen people trying to do the same thing we all were trying to do – strike it rich.

Or is that what the contestants on *Survivor* are after? It’s certainly difficult to beat one in sixteen odds at a million, but considering most of us are content to buy a lottery or raffle ticket, bet twenty on black, or ignore the whole thing altogether, it’s difficult to believe that money is the only motivation. Considering the number of reality show contestants that have moved on to another entertainment career, it seems that fame – now, ostensibly in the ordinary person’s grasp – is the goal. However, the only way it seems it is possible for celebrities that are not quite ‘A-List’ to gain or accrue more fame is to trade it for intimate access to their lives. Reality TV has developed a system in which privacy and control are currency for fame – the greater amount of privacy, and to some extent, control over one’s life given over to the producers and the public; the greater amount of fame can be

accumulated. Given the massive popularity and ubiquity of reality TV, this exchange allows for a devaluation of privacy in North American society.

The first section of this essay will examine reality TV as a genre, and how its codes and conventions allow for the use of privacy as currency for fame, thereby decreasing its value in society. The second section will discuss the representation of contestants in reality shows. The contestant not only signs away their privacy, but also control over how they are represented, allowing the producers to fit them into a role through editing, based on what the story may need. The third section will discuss the ways in which privacy is currency in reality television, and how greater access to one's life can lead to greater fame and marketability.

Though this essay addresses reality television in general and may refer to examples from different series, the two series I chose to use as examples are: *Survivor*, one of the pioneers of reality game shows, in its eighth and 'All-Star' season made up of former contestants; and *The Apprentice*, the latest hit reality game show starring Donald Trump, both produced by Mark Burnett. I also made use of some excellent web resources: the official *Survivor* website (<http://www.cbs.com/survivor/>), the official *The Apprentice* website (http://www.nbc.com/The_Apprentice/), and Television Without Pity (<http://www.televisionwithoutpity.com>), all accessed in May of 2004.

Reality TV as a Genre

Casey, Casey, Calvert, French, & Lewis (2002) define 'reality TV' as a variety of programming which takes as its subject matter real lives, real-life situations and events, and the first person accounts of ordinary people. It is a hybrid form of television, drawing on and reworking the codes and conventions of different genres, such as documentary, tabloid

journalism, and in the case of shows like *Survivor* and *The Apprentice*, the game show and soap opera. However, 'reality' is a signified produced by signifiers, an effect of a set of technical choices made by producers to enhance the credibility and authenticity of their product. (Budd, Craig & Steinman, 1999) Though the term 'reality TV' is used to describe a vast range of programming, there are conventions that most forms of reality television share.

One of the key elements of reality programming is the juxtaposition of the 'everyday' with the unexpected and bizarre. (Casey *et al*, 2002) *Survivor* offers this by showing "sixteen Americans, from different walks of life" put into 'survival' circumstances – unusual in itself – but also put into a game of elimination where the last one left is named the winner. *The Apprentice* takes the job interview – an experience nearly every viewer has had – and raises the stakes by making the job the presidency of a company for Donald Trump. The unexpected is not only achieved by the introduction of 'ordinary' people to extraordinary circumstances and a viewing public, but it is also achieved by the constant attempts to bring the unexpected to an already-established reality formula. Twists and changes to the game are common in reality television; this recent season of *Survivor* alone had three tribes rather than two, a tribal swap when a merge was expected, and the announcement of a second million dollar prize to be given to the contestant who won a public online vote. As the show itself becomes common, the producers must make changes to continue to create surprises for the viewer.

Reality television also purports to follow a linear narrative. The narratives are usually divided into scenes – segments that take place in one time and space. (Budd *et al*, 1999) Therefore, *Survivor* segments are divided by onscreen titles, such as "Day 12, Chapera" to indicate the amount of time that the contestants have been 'on the island' and the tribal camp that we are currently watching. In both *Survivor* and *The Apprentice*, short montages indicate passage of time and changes in location; In *The Apprentice*, time-lapse footage of

New York City indicates the passage of the night to the next morning, while in *Survivor*, the dark sky above the camp will fade into a montage of the tribe waking up. This style of continuity is designed to produce the realist, diegetic space and time in which the narrative takes place, and it does so more or less invisibly, so that the narrative seems to tell itself, instead of only existing as the product of human choice. (Budd *et al*, 1999) The way the narrative is presented appears to be not a way at all, but the real story of what happened, while the selection, control and mediation involved in the processes of all preproduction, shooting and editing of cultural product is generally ignored by the viewing public. (Budd *et al*, 1999)

Survivor's producer, Mark Burnett, has estimated that for every hour of television broadcast; over a hundred hours of tape are edited down. Given that each hour generally covers approximately two days, this, as well as Burnett's quote in the introductions, indicates the constant surveillance the subjects of reality television willingly consent to. In *The Apprentice* episode 'Circus, Circus', two of the male contestants are shown in towels, shirtless while shaving, while in a later episode, 'Down to the Wire', a contestant is caught in a lie due to taped telephone conversations. Being constantly followed by camera crews, interviewed, and having one's phone conversations recorded for use on the show is common practice in reality TV.

Another convention of reality television is shaky, hand-held camera work, infrared cameras, and conversations pitched so low that they require subtitling. This supposed immediacy of image claims implicitly to present literal, unmediated reality. Its very lack of commercial polish and apparent control signifies raw authenticity. (Budd *et al*, 1999) *Survivor* has some of the best examples of this 'authenticity' through its infrared night-vision cameras to capture discussions between subjects who seem to be unaware. In *The Apprentice* episode

Down to the Wire, Part 2, one of the finalists, Bill, runs to a set of garbage dumpsters to search for a crucial sign for his task. The camera crew follows, running right behind him and giving the viewer a bouncy, shaky trip behind Bill, increasing the sense of immediacy and tension. This causes reality TV to seem more immediate, more transparent, and more real than fiction television. (Budd *et al*, 1999)

How then, does the genre allow for exchange of privacy and fame? Reality TV is, first, entirely based on the exchange of privacy for something (usually money) on a denotative level. However, as reality programs have become more popular, particularly in the last five years, reality 'stars' have emerged. The eliminatory nature of the majority of reality competitions not only gives the contestants a better chance at the prize, but also gives them more camera time. 'Evil' Dr. Will (*Big Brother*), Richard Hatch, Rob and Amber (*Survivor*), and Oswald and Danny (*The Amazing Race*) are all immediately recognizable names to a reality programming fan, and all people who either won their specific competition, or went far enough in it to leave an impression on the viewing public. Indeed, a form of reality show that is primarily geared to camera time has sprung up, where the prize is either incidental or non-existent. Shows like *Paradise Hotel* have contestants vying to see who can stay the longest on the show, with some vague promise of a prize in the future. Reality TV's ability to create stars – or at least, known quantities - has not been lost on celebrities themselves, as more and more of them produce reality shows following their lives.

Not only is there an exchange of privacy in reality TV, but also an exchange of control. Contestants have a lack of control over the 'unexpected', such as *Survivor*'s surprise tribal swap that put Rob, one side of a power alliance (and budding relationship) on a separate tribe from Amber, the other. In addition, the deceptively linear, deceptively 'real' character of reality programming causes the choices involved in its production to be invisible,

which allows producers to create a representation of contestants that serves their purposes, regardless of accuracy. In this, subjects of reality television not only sacrifice their privacy, but also control over how they are seen by an increasingly vocal viewing public.

Representation of Contestants: Lack of Privacy, Lack of Control

In the majority of television programs, stories and characters are radically simplified, made formulaic so they can be consumed. (Budd *et al*, 1999) This is also true of reality television. Contestants are reduced to useful templates or stereotypes - the villain, the nice guy, the cute girl, the military man, the blue-collar or white-collar worker. The use of stereotypes acts as a means of establishing boundaries between 'insiders' and 'outsiders'. The audience is encouraged to identify with 'positive' rather than 'negative' characteristics, commonly giving the audience a central hero or other figure with whom to identify. (Casey *et al*, 2002) This allows audiences to easily 'love' or 'hate' a contestant based on the stereotype the producers create for them. *Survivor: All-Star* has two excellent examples of this in Rupert Boneham and Jerri Manthey.

Jerri, a contestant from *Survivor: The Australian Outback*, had been cast in that season as a villain, the cold-hearted bitch who was willing to use anyone and anything to get her way. Since that season, she has spent countless interviews and two more reality shows (*The Surreal Life* Season 1 and *Survivor: All-Stars*) attempting to correct that perception. Despite inoffensive and decent behaviour in the most recent season of *Survivor*, Jerri was shouted down by the audience during the reunion show and chose to leave during a commercial break, presumably upset by the reaction. The unrestricted access given and the control ceded by Jerri has resulted in the public's conception of her as a villain, which the producers

of *All-Stars* were more than happy to remind the viewers of when another contestant, or Jerri herself mentioned it.

Rupert, a contestant from the recent *Survivor: Pearl Islands*, was cast as a lovable teddy-bear type, a youth counsellor with survival skills who kept his tribe well fed with fish. The public responded very favourably to this depiction (as did Rupert, who seems to enjoy the attention), he became one of the best-loved Survivors and was given a spot on *All-Stars* right out of *Pearl Islands*. Despite a lack of ability in game play, some spectacularly bad decisions and a certain arrogance, he remained the most popular contestant on *All-Stars* by a wide margin. (www.cbs.com/survivor/, May 26, 2004) Rupert's popularity is such that, when he placed fourth in *All-Stars*, the producers gave him a third shot at a million dollars, announcing that the prize would be given to the contestant who won a public online vote. Predictably, Rupert won. In Rupert's case, his exchange of his privacy and control over his representation has not only resulted in monetary gain, but also in fame and adulation that would normally be difficult for him to achieve.

In the final episode of *The Apprentice*, 'Down to the Wire, Part 2', a review of the entire season is recast in terms of a showdown between the two finalists, Kwame Jackson and Bill Rancic. The main difference between the two over the season had been primarily management style and education; Bill is more of a hands-on, self-made man with an undergraduate degree, while Kwame has a more relaxed style and is a Harvard MBA. However, the review of the season cast Bill as more staid and conservative and Kwame as 'flashy' – in one case attributing the idea of using a white tiger to draw a crowd in 'Circus, Circus' to Kwame, when it had been the idea of one of his team mates (never mind that, at the time, he and Bill were on the same team!). The review also highlighted one of the only conflicts between the two finalists, over Kwame's decision to sign autographs at Planet

Hollywood to lure in more customers. This part of the review was capped off with the unfortunate image of Kwame, a young black man, saying to Bill, “It’s not like I sold the kid crack.” This is perhaps one of the only times Kwame misspoke in such a manner, and the producers used it repeatedly to highlight differences between he and Bill; unsurprising, considering that Bill named Donald Trump’s apprentice shortly thereafter. This gives an uncomfortable level of racial stereotyping to the program – Kwame is younger, threatening and riskier, while Bill’s style is closer to the ‘accepted’ way of doing business and more visually compatible with the makeup of corporate America.

These stereotypes are also useful in terms of interpellating, or ‘hailing’ the viewers. As media images can be seen to represent, or ‘stand in for’ the consumers (Casey *et al*, 2002), the contestants are edited so viewers can identify with them. The ‘confessional’, or the individual interviews with participants of a reality program, has perhaps been the single most useful tool in the representation of contestants, giving the producer hours of interview footage per episode to manipulate in order to create the character they want. In *Survivor: Amazon* and *All-Stars*, Rob Cesternino was a favourite contestant of many viewers (and an all-time favourite of mine) because not only was he a reality television fan who wrote his college senior thesis on “The Impact of Reality Television”, but also because he was edited to emphasize that fandom; At one point in *All-Stars*, Rob is shown in ‘confessional’ enthusing about how excited he is to be playing *Survivor* with the ‘greats’ of the game - an excitement a reality television fan could easily understand and empathize with. In creating characters that viewers can relate to, producers appeal to a wide range of viewers and contestants have an easily accessible fan base.

Privacy as Currency

Given the lack of influence contestants have over their representation and the access to their lives that must be offered up to the producers, why would someone agree to be part of reality television? As prizes become smaller and, in some cases non-existent, it appears that fame is the primary motivation – and the more privacy one is willing to cede, the further one is thrust into the public eye.

At the moment, the most successful ‘non-celebrities’ in their use of privacy as currency are Rob Mariano and Amber Brkich, the runner-up and Sole Survivor from *Survivor: All-Stars*. Neither contestant was very well liked from their previous *Survivor* appearances, and both had been voted out seventh in their respective seasons. However, they ran away with both the game and the story of *All-Stars* by not only having an unbreakable alliance, but also by televising their entire relationship. The early flirting, first kiss and first ‘date’ (a reward challenge that Rob won), were all filmed and broadcast for public consumption – details that are very private in most people’s romantic relationships. The host, Jeff Probst, and the other contestants took this as an opportunity to ask them questions about the nature and validity of their relationship at Tribal Council, which they answered as opposed to responding with ‘none of your business’. As the story of their relationship went on, they gained greater popularity with the public, culminating in their engagement on the live reunion show, which made the reading of the votes to follow somewhat anti-climactic. That week, Rob and Amber appeared on no less than three magazine covers, *People* included. They have also received offers to televise their wedding, presumably much like the first wedding spawned from reality television - that of *The Bachelorette*’s Trista and Ryan. Rob and Amber, who both admit to aspirations of greater television fame, have managed to trade their privacy – and the privacy of their relationship – for greater recognition. The

opportunities past *Survivor* contestants have been offered seem to point to the same or better for Amber and Rob; Aside from the usual personal appearances, interviews and speaking engagements, Colby Donaldson (*Australian Outback, All-Stars*) is now a pitchman for Gillette, Colleen Haskell (*Borneo*) co-starred with Rob Schneider in the film *The Animal*, Jon 'Johnny Fairplay' Dalton is now working as a manager for the new wrestling federation NWA, good friends Alicia Calaway and Jeff Varner (*Australian Outback*) have both done hosting and correspondent work for Oxygen and E! respectively. Susan Hawk (*Borneo*) recently went through an 'extreme makeover' after being approached to do so by *Extra!*. The contestants on *The Apprentice* seem to be doing as well; many were offered jobs after the show, in particular the runner-up, Kwame, who was offered a position by Mark Cuban, the billionaire owner of the Dallas Mavericks – and the soon-to-be star of ABC's *The Benefactor*. It seems that, as long as the public has interest in these reality 'stars', they can cede their privacy to garner greater fame.

This is not only the case for 'ordinary' people who find themselves on reality television. Celebrities have become increasingly involved in reality television. Donald Trump approached Mark Burnett specifically to develop *The Apprentice* after the success of other celebrity-based reality shows, such as *The Osbournes*, *The Simple Life* and *Newlyweds: Nick and Jessica*. Nick Lachey and Jessica Simpson are particularly good examples for the use of privacy for currency; both were only marginally successful singers before *Newlyweds*, but since the success of the show they have had a variety show, been featured on countless magazine covers, increased their record sales and Jessica has landed the role of Daisy Duke in the upcoming *The Dukes of Hazzard* movie. Nick and Jessica also appeared on *The Apprentice* in the episode *Down to the Wire, Part 2*, during which Trump made sure to mention their show. Other celebrities appeared in the episode *Tit for Tat* for a charity auction; Russell Simmons,

the cast of *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, Regis Philbin, Carson Daly and Isaac Mizrahi were all featured discussing donations they could offer to the charity. It seems that celebrities have also fully embraced the idea of selling their privacy, though in their case, the monetary rewards are certainly greater.

Reality is a central strategy in the naturalization of ideological discourses. (Budd *et al*, 1999) As this exchange of privacy becomes entrenched in the world of television, it becomes naturalized in the 'real world', so that public concerns in regards to privacy are devalued. If we become used to seeing the intimate details of people's lives – including notoriously reclusive celebrities – we become more comfortable with the idea of people having access to our own lives. Our increasing lack of privacy is useful to the hegemony; the more those in power know about us, the easier it is to sell to us – the easier it becomes to control us.

Andy Warhol once said that, in the future, we would all have fifteen minutes of fame. It appears that now, you can extend those fifteen minutes, if only at the cost of your privacy and control over your life. The massive popularity of reality television has allowed for the creation of a system in which privacy and control are currency for fame, devaluing privacy in North American society. Reality TV allows for this exchange as a genre, in its unrestricted access to the details of people's lives and its deceptively 'real' appearance, as well as the producers' ability to create a representation of the subjects that serves the purposes of the narrative. The exchange of privacy and control for fame is certainly successful and in some cases, quite lucrative, as examples demonstrate. Development of new and more bizarre reality shows (*Playing It Straight*, *The Swan*) speaks to not only the public appetite for 'reality', but also the continued expansion of the system, which asks subjects to do stranger and

stranger things in pursuit of fame. Perhaps reality programming has provided a kind of ‘shortcut’ to the American Dream – the need for hard work and perseverance is eliminated if one can get cast on a successful reality show. It’s possible that reality television has entirely changed the North American conception of success; fortune is no longer as important as fame. Celebrity is not a question of ‘if’, but a question of ‘when’ – and how much you are willing to trade for it.

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