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Unreality TV

Andrew Sikula, Sr. and Lorraine P. Anderson

"Reality TV"--never has an oxymoron been so contradictory. Never have two words joined together been so incompatible and undescriptive of the real world. In fact, most reality TV programming is just about as far from reality as we can get. In truth, reality TV as today presented is actually fantasy viewing and, unfortunately, usually fantasy of the worst kind.

We have always known that television shows were not real life, but we watched them nonetheless, granting license and latitude under the rationale of entertainment. For awhile, some of this entertainment was healthy and wholesome--but often, not anymore. Using the U.S. Constitution and the First Amendment respectively as a shield and sword, entertainment executives have subjected American and worldwide audiences to an almost unbelievable array of filth, horror, and sometimes near-pornography. It seems as if each new show tries to outdo its viewing competition and predecessor, stooping to newer and ever downward-spiraling lows in decency, taste, and morality. Trying to achieve shock value, nothing is too gross or gruesome to bring into the family home over TV airways. Degenerate studio producers ridiculously defend their right to offend us by stating that we can always turn the TV off or on to another channel, knowing full well that working parents cannot constantly control the TV viewing practices of latchkey children or unsupervised teenagers.

Extremely disappointing are the various company advertisers who sponsor these morbid monitors. There was a time when corporate sponsors carefully selected television programs that were associated with their products and services. Sadly, today market share, prime time, Nielsen ratings and economic factors dominate TV marketing and advertising decisions.

However, the biggest disappointment of all is the size of the viewing audiences for unreality TV. Cultural values, societal norms, and personal morality have become so low that we today find huge numbers of viewing fans for shows that feature human beings at their worst. The basic depravity and original sinful nature of humankind are evidenced in the popularity of trash TV. Dishonesty, cheating, lying, and lust are constant themes throughout shows like Jerry Springer,

Anna Nicole, Fear Factor, Joe Millionaire, Survivor, Big Brother, The Bachelorette, The Real World, and Worst Case Scenario. And believe it or not, to add insult to injury, and to demonstrate just how ridiculous Hollywood has become, and how gullible the public today is, Fox television network producers have just concluded a short-run new reality TV series called Mr. Personality, which featured masked suitors hosted by none other than the internationally known immoralist icon Monica Lewinsky!

Regarding the case in point and the tentative programming of Who's Crazy Now?, this proposed new show is just more of the same. Putting people in embarrassing activities involving public nudity, eating worms or whatever, and other demeaning behavior violates the basic values and ethics of human respect and dignity. Regardless of the economic incentives involved, it is time for us to put a stop to such madness individually and collectively. Courts need to curb individual First Amendment rights when they offend the majority and hurt society and culture as a whole.

The commercial challenge today is for business to produce goods and services--including mass media print, books, records, CDs, DVDs, films, and television programs--that are inspiring, not degrading. We need to build people and societies up, not tear them down. Reality TV needs to get real. If it insists on dealing with fantasy rather than truth, the fantasies ought to be constructive and godly, not destructive and devilish in nature, purpose, content, and result. So-called "reality TV" needs to be reborn or regenerated in the future so that the human condition and spirit can be enlightened and uplifted rather than being continually debased and destroyed, which is the current state of affairs.

In regard to the specific dilemma presented in this case vignette, Dr. Goodley is confronted with a situation that all leaders and most businesspeople find themselves in at one time or another: whether to act in a manner that is completely legal, but morally wrong. On the one hand, Dr. Goodley can assuage his fears with the knowledge that he is merely responding to what the public wants. Throughout history, mankind has developed grotesque forms of entertainment. In the days of Caesar, gladiator fights to the death filled the coliseum amid the cheers of the audience. Dogfights, cockfights, and lewd exotic dancing are also types of entertainment that appeal to the base side of man. In addition, Dr. Goodley can tell himself that reality TV is legal. The participants are not coerced or forced to be on the shows. Moreover, reality TV has gained such popularity that discussions are underway for the creation of a reality TV network. Finally, Dr.

Goodley likely believes in the free enterprise system and feels it would be his good fortune to be chosen to participate as a consultant for \$40,000. Yet, the case is not as simple as it may seem.

One would presume that Dr. Goodley pursued a career in psychology because of his desire to help people who wrestle with mental health issues. How can he be part of an effort that he knows holds the strong likelihood of causing mental duress to the participants? Even worse what happens if Dr. Goodley fails to see the potential for violence in a participant prior to the show and that person does bodily harm to him- or herself or to others? When stressed to their maximum limits, people do things they would never do under normal circumstances. Talk show participants have sometimes committed felonies based upon the embarrassing position they find themselves in following the show and the true confessions revealed on camera. The absurd scenarios played out on reality TV are far from normal circumstances. Dr. Goodley should take heed and listen to his conscious. He needs to now pass up this alleged consulting opportunity of a lifetime so he can look and face himself squarely in the mirror in the future.

Some reality TV shows do not cross the bounds of human decency. Shows such as American Idol, The Amazing Race, and Trading Spaces have amassed huge audiences because of good programming. During the American Idol season the public has seen regular people transformed into music industry celebrities. Each week we watch them struggle, and we cheered as we see them hit the difficult notes and songs. A recent episode resulted in more than 24 million viewer votes being cast for the show's top two performers to determine who would win the title of American Idol. Admittedly, halfway through the season, there was a scandal: A contestant was kicked off the show for failing to report an arrest. There were also moments of embarrassment for those who couldn't carry a tune, but the show was not centered on depravity and what happens to people in the worst situations. American Idol rejoices in the success of regular people. Other reality shows should look to these examples as models of how to succeed without losing one's moral compass.