

## Probe

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# WHO'S THE RAT?

*Douglas Rushkoff*

A random sample of average people is divided into two groups: teachers and students. Each student sits on one side of a wall trying to remember a sequence of words, while the teacher sits on the other and is instructed to deliver an electric shock at each wrong answer. The voltage is increased until the student is writhing on the floor and screaming in agony. How far will each teacher go? Will he or she deliver a lethal dose? Finally, it will be revealed to the teachers that their pupils are really just actors. Won't they be embarrassed when we all see how easily they can be turned into sadists?

No, this is isn't one of next season's reality shows but the very real psychology experiment carried out at Yale in 1961 by Dr. Stanley Milgram. Participants were so terribly anguished over their capacity to inflict pain on demand that the much-publicized saga led to new ethical guidelines for psychological experimentation.

No such restrictions appear to apply to reality television programs, where sustained sadism of this sort can be observed somewhere on the TV dial pretty much any night of the week. Just when it seems as though this genre, if we can call that, has finally peaked, a new crop of shows even more outrageously cruel or dishonest than the last appears on the horizon. Welcome to the American media space, where neither a psychology degree nor an ethics certification is required for us to look in on psychological terrorism, just for the fun of it.

How did television fall to such new lows? The failure and abuse of traditional storytelling techniques certainly had something to do with it. Since Aristotle intuited the "arc" of increasing tension and release that serves as the dramatic spine of any successful play, writers have been honing this formula down to its most crude

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and utilitarian essence: create characters we like, put them in danger, and give them an easily digestible solution before the end. It's led to a predictability in mainstream drama and comedy that's nauseatingly claustrophobic. Shows that are not assembled through focus groups are written by committee, so that anything resembling nuance or meaning is ironed out before they reach the commercial airwaves.

No, any real messages are reserved for the sponsors, who use the very same arc to program product preferences. (We don't call the stuff on television "programming" for nothing. It's not the schedule or television being programmed; it's us.) So, for about 20 seconds we are brought up the inclined plane of increasing stakes—a pimple? fired from work? carpet stains? social anxiety?—and in the last 10 we must swallow whatever solution the sponsor dictates: a new cream, investment, solvent, or pill. In ancient drama, implausible solutions were called *deus ex machina*, where a god would descend from the heavens to save the hero from an otherwise tragic circumstance. Now a product serves that same function. But the experience of submitting to these mini-dramas has made television audiences cynical and difficult to please. Making matters worse for the studios that make TV, viewers have grown suspicious of traditional, crafted narrative, because it is used toward coercive ends.

In such an environment, reality television is experienced as liberation from the captive spell of the programmer. By throwing a dozen real people (or, at worst, wannabe actors) in a house, on an island, or in a chateau and then forcing them to come up with their own dialogue, these unscripted shows mean to release their audiences from the predictability of crafted drama and to replace it with the spontaneity—and the stakes—of real life.

Unlike prewritten shows whose consequences and morals have been predetermined by a programmer out of sight and with his own agenda, reality programs feel as though they reinstate the meritocracy. Like sporting events, they generate a sense of fair play. This is a competition. We are to believe that only the laws of natural selection will determine who is left on the island at the end of *Survivor*, or which of the handsome men will win the affections of the single *Bachelorette*.

Are nationwide audiences consciously tuning in for confirmation of Darwin's theory of evolution? Of course not. But in a world where everything from the job market to the stock market to national elections appears to be increasingly fixed, escapism takes the form of the fantasy of real-life competition occurring on a level playing field. When reality itself seems controlled by lawyers, rules, inheritances, and who you know, entertainment emerges as the safe haven for the laws of nature.

So instead of Galapagos, we get the island of *Survivor*, where only the strongest and most cunning will make it to the end of their battle against the elements, insects, starvation and, most Darwinian-feeling of all, each other. As in Mutual of Omaha's *Wild Kingdom*, nature is untamed and has its own laws. And we, the viewing public, get to watch the test sample lose the artificial and nature-defeating pretenses and conveniences of modern life, and duke it out as humans were "meant" to.

On *Temptation Island*, real married couples test the bounds of their socially constructed unions by mixing with buff and buxom singles in bathing suits who have no purpose but to seduce. Participants on some of these shows actually had sexual intercourse—evolution’s ultimate moment of decision—and when it’s extra-marital as it is on many of reality TV’s permutations, it represents nature’s ultimate triumph over culture. It’s all about restoring what audiences conceive of us as the natural order. Even the talent show *American Idol* means to replace—for one lucky winner, anyway—the insiderly, blow-job-driven culture of the music industry with a fair, democratically chosen pop star, courtesy of AT&T.

But although they may mean to restore a sense of fair play to television, reality shows are anything but natural selection. These are fixed decks, where the preliminary conditions and choice of participants yield a very predictable array of possible outcomes. No, the shows may not be scripted, but they are anything but real life.

It’s not just because eight MTV veejay hopefuls wouldn’t normally find themselves living together in a fabulous loft in Seattle. Rather, it is because these shows are absolutely crafted situations. They are premises as extreme as those of any situation comedy.

Remember, back in television’s so-called “golden years,” situation comedies were precisely that: situations. A guy’s uncle is a Martian. A family’s nanny is magic. My horse can talk. Your mother is a car. That’s why they were called situation comedies—because the situation drove the comedy. Today’s sitcoms have no situation to speak of: some friends drink coffee in the same place. An office where, uh, people work. One of our friends is gay.

As sitcoms’ situational component declines to that of real life or lower, reality TV makes up for it all in the absurdity of its set ups. These shows are not merely the edited clips from spy cameras, but hypotheses on human behavior. They are laboratory experiments (with poor controls) in which conditions are set up in a very particular way so that the most dramatic (read: painful or humiliating) results can emerge.

Like psych experiments, each show has an implicit assumption. What will happen if people are put on an island where they must depend on one another for survival? They might just learn to get along. Hmmm. What if they have to vote one person off every day? That might make things more interesting. What if a group of pretty women compete for the attention of a multi-millionaire? Been there. What if he’s not really a millionaire, but only pretending to be? Cool. What if we take formerly famous people and put them in a house together as if they were contestants on *Big Brother*? They’ll probably prove to be as boring as regular people and come to realize this in an entertaining display of group pathos.

But the hypotheses are, at best, retrofitted rationalizations for the pain we inflict on the shows’ participants. These shows aren’t reality programs or social experimentation at all, but precisely concocted exercises in humiliation. It is not our love for the emergent, seemingly spontaneous unscriptedness of these shows nor our drive to see the reinstatement of merit-based rule sets that lies at the heart of our

fascination with them. These might be the effect of our viewing experience, but not the cause.

No, it is the cruelty itself we find so compelling. Even a reality show as seemingly innocuous as *The Osbournes* finds its core entertainment value in the sad pathos of its drugged, mentally ill protagonist. Indeed, the lead singer of Black Sabbath has found himself in hell and our cameras certainly make it worse.

This hunger to exercise cruelty and humiliation—especially on those who have no ability to fight back—was observed in an experiment that was, itself, condemned for unethical treatment of test subjects. The infamous Stanford Prison Experiment of 1971 split a random group of men into prisoners and guards. Almost immediately, the guards took it upon themselves to develop increasingly humiliating tortures for their prisoners to endure. Although planned as a 2-week investigation on the psychological effects of prison life, it was canceled after just 6 days because the guards developed such heinous methods for demeaning their prisoners that many began showing signs of nervous breakdown.

Might we, the television audience, now in something like the roles of the guards, be putting the subjects of our reality experiments in the most humiliating situations we can stand to watch? What was it, after all, that compelled more Americans than watched Dan Rather's interview with Saddam Hussein to watch the final episode of *Joe Millionaire*—a show where women competed desperately with one another for the hand of a man they were about to learn was actually a construction worker? We wanted to see the shock and humiliation on the face of a woman who had engaged in a sex act under false pretenses and was rejected anyway. And it was we, the audience, who inflicted her pain through Joe, our avatar—all from the safe distance offered by this very remote medium. Now that's entertainment.

Does our immersion in diversions of this kind turn us into crueler people? A study released in March 2003 by two psychologists at University of Michigan finds that men who frequently watched violent programs as children were more likely to shove people than those who watched them less. And such links aren't limited to just physical behavior. In 2002, researchers at the National Institute on Media and the Family aimed to demonstrate that watching violent TV makes kids not just more physically violent, but "relationally violent"—that is, meaner (<http://www.washtimes.com/national/20030311-35013318.htm> and <http://www.heritage.org/research/features/familydatabase/detail.cfm?ID1=3798>).

But although the studies show that socially and physically violent people may watch meaner, more violent programs, they don't show cause—only correlation. It might just be that cruel people find cruel TV shows to watch. And the more cruel we are, the more programming will be tailored to our wants.

Still, we engage in this orgy of tele-sadism at our own risk. There's an emotional response in the observer of a cruel situation, too. That's the real reason why the psychological experiments that look so much like reality programs have been banned. It's not the prisoners or the fake electric shock victims who end up so traumatized—it's the guards and pain-givers who, confronted by their own capacity to mete out punishment, are overwrought with guilt and shame.

It's to avoid—or at least postpone—this sense of guilt that we look to justify our cruelty. “She deserves to be humiliated because she was just a hussy,” we rationalize. And this need to justify violence or cruelty after the fact can easily be exploited.

No one understood this better than the ancient Romans, whose blood sports were so influential over public mood that it was illegal for a governor to convene games within three months of an upcoming election. The Romans used the cruelty and humiliation of the games—as well as the audience's need to justify their own urge to witness them—to great advantage. When people felt the emperor's policies were too restrictive, he could offer “thumbs up” to grant a fallen fighter another life. If the public felt he had become too lax, he could offer the opposite verdict. To create the illusion of class mobility and a restoration of natural competition, the emperor would occasionally grant freedom to a slave who won an unusually long string of contests and survived.

As any good totalitarian propagandist will tell you, our appetite for violence, both physical and emotional, is outweighed only by our need to justify it. In their own, pre-Darwinian version of the origin of the species, the Romans would stage contests that demonstrated the hierarchy of the animal kingdom. Two dogs against a bear, a bear against a lion, then a lion against an elephant. This would then extend to the hierarchy of different types of humans: a midget against a woman, a woman against a Christian, a Christian against a Moor, a Moor against a Roman slave, a Roman slave against a Roman soldier. The public hunger for violence was turned to the state's need to demonstrate the natural and proper order of Roman society.

Likewise, the latest round of reality shows appears to be designed to punish their participants with humiliation while rewarding the audience with some reinforcement of their basest prejudices. A new, reality TV version of the *Beverly Hillbillies* will transport a genuine trailer park family to a mansion in Beverly Hills. Just watch how incompetent they are! Or, better, let's find out that—in the end—their awful, low-class behavior is really no worse than the behavior of their neighbors! As long as the people are actually humiliated for our entertainment, we'll take whatever pill the programmers want us to.

Hey, wait a minute! Wasn't reality TV supposed to free us from that programming stuff? Now I feel used. Even a bit, well, guilty.

In the great psychological research trial that is network TV, the people inside the tube will always be the actors, and we with remote controls in our hands, are the test group. Those of us participating in these elaborately staged social experiments may soon come to realize with painful and soul-shaking clarity that we aren't the ones in the lab coats, at all. We're the rats.

