Scott Sassa is NBC’s top programming executive. As of mid-July, 2000, NBC was the only one of the top TV networks not to have a reality or "peeping Tom" television program. CBS scored a big summer hit with "Survivor" on which two teams struggled to survive on an isolated Pacific island and members of those teams vied to survive being voted off the island and out of the show’s contest for a million dollars. CBS then followed with "Big Brother," in which contestants lived together in a house with two bedrooms and a single bathroom. The house was built in short order on the parking lot of CBS in Studio City, California.

These shows follow such others as "Real People" and "Candid Camera." "Big Brother" is the creation of Dutch producer John De Mol and a version of it has already played in Europe. The idea came to him after an evening of drinking when the quasi-scientific venture, Biosphere II, was discussed. So far, he has come up with "Big Brother" in which the "detainees" nominate two candidates for dismissal and the audience vote one person out. De Mol’s "The Bus" has a referee throwing passengers off one by one. In his "Chains of Love," a man or woman chooses four members of the opposite sex to be chained together with him or her. Each day the man or woman rejects another person until left with the one he or she considers most attractive. In still another, "Money for Your Life," an Every-man or Every-woman is trained to use a camera and photograph their everyday life. (See Dickey, C. & Peyser, M. [2000, July 19]. CBS tries a dutch tv treat. Newsweek, p. 69.)

The surprising success of these "reality shows" has left NBC out in the cold of diminishing ratings. Sassa of NBC had determined to go easy on sex and stand by high quality shows such as "Friends," "Frasier," "Law and Order, and "ER." But by mid-July Sassa was saying:

Reality programming is definitely here to stay. It's not just a fad:
It’s a trend...We will not diminish the level of quality. But we cannot ignore the level of interest in these kinds of (reality) shows...This is just a thing you have to adapt to. It’s the way the world has changed. (Aucoin, D. [2000, July 19]. NBC tries to cope with 'reality' craze. The Boston Globe, pp. D1, 5.)

So NBC follows with "Chains of Love" and calls it a "relationship show."
What is so popular about ‘reality television’? It is said that these programs appeal to the voyeur in all of us. ‘But,’ asks columnist Ellen Goodman, ‘can you be a voyeur when you’re viewing an exhibitionist? It’s like being called a Peeping Tom at a strip show.’ ([2000, July 19]. Will we be able to survive ‘Big Brother’? The Boston Globe, p. F7.)

Goodman suggests that we are compensating for our loss of community by creating false communities. Torn apart as families by television, phones, and computers—these families have none of these and are forced to relate.

These shows create the same kind of phony intimacy behind the temporary mourning for Princess Diana. In fact, the only chance for intimacy is privacy (which these shows take away). That was, ironically, the conclusion of the original ‘Big Brother.’ Only in private and in what we now must call real ‘real life’ can any of us be truly known and connected....George Orwell’s nightmare has been cheerily transformed into our latest prime-time spectacle (op. cit.).

Film and television critic, Michael Medved, also rejects the notion that the popularity stems from voyeuristic desires. Instead he sees these shows taking advantage of "our need to overcome an overwhelming sense of loneliness and isolation. The situation of ‘Big Brother’—and all other ‘reality’ shows for that matter—forces people to talk to one another (forced intimacy)."

Medved points out how the average American child between 2 and 18 years of age "spends 1,500 hours a year watching television" and only "75 hours a year speaking with parents," these shows could give us all a good idea.

Imagine the benefits if every family spent a few hours each week recreating the radical rules of ‘Big Brother’: no contact with outsiders, no cross-town appointments, no phone calls, no e-mail, no television, no avoiding face-to-face contact and conversation with the other members of the household. ([2000, July 19]. Peeping tom tv exploits loneliness, not urge to snoop. USA Today, p. 6A)

He goes on to point out that this is actually the practice of some Mormons. Furthermore, it is the practice of his family and other religious Jews each week on the Sabbath. And in such faith-based homes, family members are conscious that all their talk and actions are monitored by an audience more powerful than registered by Nielsen ratings.
We may also have to admit that these programs with million dollar prizes came on at the time "Millionaire" was on top. There is a bit of the gambler in everyone, and even those who never play the lottery are often interested in interviews with those who have just won the jackpot.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. What was your first reaction on seeing or hearing about these "reality programs?"
2. What three main reasons for the popularity of these shows are given here?
3. What do you think are the reason for their popularity?
4. Do you think public taste and the lowest common denominator of acceptability is changing for the worse? If so, what do you think can be done about it?
5. Would you want your family to watch one of these shows throughout its course?
6. What do you think of a planned time of enforced family in your home?

IMPLICATIONS

1. ABC is announcing a marketing campaign for its sitcom, "Norm." The voice of actor Norm Macdonald making smutty cracks will be beamed at users of public toilets. A review of television and radio in the past ten years forces most to concede a lowering of standards.
2. The best way to combat deteriorating cultural standards in a democracy is by raising up a new generation with better discrimination.
3. Privacy, genuine relationships, and real community are ideals to be treasured and values that can be learned by children and young people.

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