Better living through reality TV: 
Television and post-welfare citizenship

Laurie Ouellette & James Hay

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_Better Living Through Reality TV_ analyzes how reality television supports a neoliberal ideology that privatizes social services and emphasizes individual responsibility. Ouellette and Hay argue that reality TV functions as a cultural technology or resource that “cultivates” good citizenship through self-governance. Reality television programs offer instruction and aid in managing lifestyles, health, and finances, as well providing individuals with ways to improve their homes and personal appearance. Although these programs often focus on individuals’ crises and concerns, they rarely address the social inequalities of socioeconomic status, race, and gender that may have contributed to these problems.

In Chapter 1, Ouellette and Hay analyze the role of “Charity TV” programs such as _Extreme Makeover: Home Edition_ in privatizing social relief. They argue that by shifting the role of aiding the “worthy poor” from the state to volunteers, private charitable organizations, and to the reality TV programs themselves; these types of programs support governmental efforts in welfare reform that emphasize personal and corporate responsibility. Media organizations such as ABC/Disney take on a quasi governmental role in coordinating private charities to help build homes and offer other types of relief to “deserving” families.
These programs at times work directly with government agencies to promote the Bush administration’s policies calling for volunteerism in providing public relief.

In Chapters 2 & 3, Ouellette and Hay argue that “TV Interventions” and “Makeover TV” programs offer interventions for those who are “outside the norm” or in need of self-improvement. Reality TV programs provide instruction in ways to handle incorrigible children, recover from addictions, manage relationships, lose weight, and improve physical appearance. A common thread throughout a range of programs is the need to exercise self-discipline and self-management. Show participants’ problems are depicted as resulting from personal choices rather than economic or social problems. For example, unhealthy lifestyles choices are addressed as problems that can be solved through education without discussion of the high costs of nutrition or health programs.

Although private responsibility is emphasized, Ouellette and Hay argue that the reality TV shows themselves take on an authoritative role in the process. Reality TV participants undergo a rigid screening process, must comply to strict show standards, and may have little input into the changes that are actually made in their lives. Show participants are often harshly criticized, belittled, and subjected to constant supervision through check-ins, surprise inspections, and hidden cameras. This process, however, is depicted as solely for the purpose of helping these individuals to improve themselves and achieve independence.

Chapter 4 analyzes reality TV programs dealing with personal and financial security such as It Takes a Thief or financial advice programs as examples of the privatization and personalization of personal security. Reality TV programs dealing with home security and ways to handle financial risks encourage the development of “self-defensive” citizens. These operate in conjunction with U.S. administration policies that favor empowering local and regional governments as risk-responders while the federal government takes on a supporting role. These types of reality TV programs also serve to support the “public-private partnerships” of government and private security and risk-management organizations.

In their final chapters, Ouellette and Hay argue that reality television does not so much promote a neoliberal ideology as provide instruction in citizenship within neoliberal structures. They argue that the artificial communities and groups created in reality TV programs offer demonstrations in group participation and governance. Compared to the earlier chapters, this section is somewhat scattered and unspecific—attempting to include everything from YouTube to Rock the Vote in the analysis. Certain arguments are unconvincing. Although shows such as Survivor do provide instruction in group governance, Ouellette and Hay’s claims concerning how this relates to a neoliberal society are rather unclear. Other key points are not addressed. For example, Ouellette and Hay argue that reality TV serves to support a number of the Bush administration’s policies but do not discuss the fact that many reality programs are based on formats and production rules established by European or internationally—based production companies. In addition, given the focus on “group-governance” in these chapters, there is surprisingly little discussion of reality TV online communities and groups.

Better Living Through Reality TV is not written for a general audience or for media effects scholars. For example, the authors introduce the term “cultivation” early in the text—a concept apparently unrelated to Gerbner’s cultivation theory. Overall, however, Ouellette and Hay offer an original analysis of the role of reality TV in contemporary society. It is a worthwhile read for those interested in developing a deeper understanding of television’s changing role in the context of cultural studies and studies of political economy.

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