Reality TV Gives Back: On the Civic Functions of Reality Entertainment

By Laurie Ouellette

Figure 1. Contestants on VH1’s Charm School perform civic service by cleaning up a polluted river (2009).
Abstract: Reality TV is more than a trivial diversion. Civic aims historically associated with documentaries (particularly citizenship training) have been radically reinterpreted and integrated into current popular reality formats.

Keywords: citizenship, civic experiment, documentary, public service, reality TV

In his influential 2002 essay “Performing the Real: Documentary Diversions,” John Corner identified a lack of civic purpose as reality TV’s defining attribute. His point of reference was the documentary tradition, from which the surge of “unscripted” entertainment since the late-1990s has selectively borrowed. Reflecting on the early stages of this development, Corner worried that if television programs like Big Brother drew from the look and style of serious documentary, they eclipsed its historical “civic functions,” defined as official citizenship training, journalistic inquiry and exposition, and (from the margins) radical interrogation (48–50). Designed “entirely in relation to its capacity to deliver entertainment” and achieve “competitive strength” in a changing marketplace, reality TV repurposed “documentary as diversion,” Corner argued (52). Serious techniques of observation, documentation, investigation, and analytic assessment were fused to the pleasure principles of soap opera and gaming—and focused inward. Cameras and microphones captured the performance of selfhood and everyday life within artificial settings and contrived formulas. For Corner, this interior play with the discourse of the real was symptomatic of a larger trend with troubling implications. Changing the whole point of documentary since the late-1800s, the new reality programming addressed TV viewers as consumers of entertainment instead of citizens. Would purposeful
factual forms of television—and democracy itself—survive?

The broader institutional context for such concerns was—and is—the waning public service tradition. Public broadcasters such as the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) in the United Kingdom and to a lesser extent the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) in the United States have played a major role in defining and developing television’s civic potentialities (Scannell; Ouellette). Envisioning the medium as an instrument of education, not a molder of merchandise, public broadcasters embraced documentary and other non-fiction formats as a dimension of their broader mission to serve and reform citizens so they might better fulfill their national “duties and obligations” (Ang 29). Factual programming high in civic legitimacy but low in “exchange value” (Corner 52) was faithfully circulated as a “cultural resource for citizenship” as well as an instrument for enlightening and guiding national populations (Murdock 186). Since the 1990s, however, this commitment has been subject to reinterpretation and flux. As BBC scholar Georgina Born points out, the “concept and practice” of public broadcasting has been “radically transformed” across Western capitalist democracies by market liberalization, deregulation, digital technologies, and the postwelfare impetus to reform and downsize the public sector in general (Born, “Digitalising” 102; see also Uncertain Vision). Faced with budget cuts, entrepreneurial mandates, and heightened competition from commercial channels and new media platforms, many public broadcasters have backed away from traditional public service–inflected programming with limited audience appeal. At a juncture when citizens are increasingly hailed as enterprising subjects and consumers of do-it-yourself lifestyle resources, major European public broadcasters have embraced many of the popular reality conventions critiqued by Corner. The BBC, for example, helped pioneer the hybridization of documentary and entertainment, and is how a major player in the global circulation of unscripted formats. With fewer resources, PBS has also experimented with the popular reality show in an attempt to bolster ratings. With the market logic responsible for “documentary as diversion” operating across public and private channels, the conditions for fostering documentary as a civic project would appear to be closing down.

Although the further decline of journalistic and investigative documentary material on television is difficult to dispute, I want to suggest that the medium has not entirely withdrawn from civic engagement since Corner’s essay was published—far from it. Many of the functions ascribed to the documentary and the public service tradition in general—particularly citizenship training—have been radically reinterpreted and integrated into popular reality formats. While the specific aims and techniques have changed, reality TV continues to be mobilized as a resource for educating and guiding individuals and populations. If the civic functions of reality entertainment are more difficult to recognize, it is partly because they now operate within market imperatives and entertainment formats, but also because prescriptions for what counts as “good citizenship” have changed. Unlike the cultural resources for citizenship provided by the (partly) tax-funded public service tradition, reality TV’s civic aims are also diffuse, dispersed, commercial (especially in the United States), and far removed from any direct association with official government policies or agendas.

In Better Living through Reality TV: Television and Post-Welfare Citizenship, James Hay and I argue that, particularly in the United States, reality TV does not “divert” passive audiences from the serious operations of democracy and public life, as much as it translates broader sociopolitical currents and circulates instructions, resources, and scripts for the navigating the changing expectations and demands of citizenship. Many reality programs explicitly address TV viewers as subjects of capacity who exercise freedom and civic agency within (not against) entertainment and consumer culture. This is not particularly surprising, to the extent that reality TV took shape alongside the neoliberal policies and reforms of the 1990s, including the downsizing of the public sector, welfare reform, the outsourcing of state powers and services, the emphasis on consumer choice, and heightened expectations of personal responsibility. Within this context, we suggest, the application of documentary techniques to the demonstration, performance, and testing of self and everyday life makes reality entertainment potentially useful to new strategies of “governing at a distance” that deemphasize public oversight and require enterprising individuals to manage their own health, prosperity, and well being (Rose). From The Apprentice to The Biggest Loser, reality games command an indirect and unofficial role in constituting, normalizing, educating, and training the self-empowering the citizens beckoned by political authorities. However artificial and staged these programs appear on the surface, they help to constitute powerful truths concerning appropriate forms of civic conduct and problem-solving. To the extent that reality TV’s civic functions are also marketable, affective, entertaining, and executed through dispersed partnerships
among the television industry, sponsors, nonprofit agencies, celebrities, and TV viewers, they parallel with (and have helped to constitute) the “reinvention of government” in the United States (under Clinton and Bush) as a series of decentralized public-private partnerships on one hand, and self-enterprising citizens on the other (Ouellette and Hay 18–24).

Cultural studies scholar Toby Miller once theorized citizenship as an ongoing pull between the “selfish demands” of the consumer economy and the “selfless requirements” of the political order (136). This tension takes on an even greater degree of intensity as the line between consumerism and public politics further collapses, and the requirements of citizenship come to include the actualization of the self through consumer culture and the execution of compassion and ethical responsibility to others. We are expected to actualize and maximize ourselves in a world of goods and perform as virtuous subjects whose voluntary activities in the public world are, as George W. Bush explained during his inaugural address, “just as important as anything government does.” In addition to calling on nonprofits, charities, and faith-based organizations to temper gaps left by the downsized welfare state, both the Bush and Clinton administrations promoted volunteerism as a preferred mode of privatized civic empowerment. Reality TV’s contributions to what might be called postwelfare civic responsibility manifested within this milieu and are particularly evident in the “do-good” experiments that have flooded the airwaves since the millennium.

From American Idol Gives Back to Oprah’s Big Give, a stream of high-profile helping ventures has appeared to redeem reality TV’s scandalous associations with bug eating, navel gazing, and bed swapping. These programs (and the marketing discourses that surround them) make explicit claims about reality TV’s civic importance. Do-good programs can take on a variety of formats—from the audience participation show to the competition to the make-over—but all reject the earlier notion of public service as education and preparation for participation in the official political processes. Reality entertainment instead intervenes directly in social life, enacting “can do” solutions to largely personalized problems within emotional and often suspenseful formats. The template was established by Extreme Makeover Home Edition (2002–present), a successful ABC program that mobilizes private resources (sponsors, experts, nonprofits, volunteers) in a “race against time” to revamp the run-down houses of needy families (see Ouellette and Hay 42–56). The participants are selected by casting agents who find the most “deserving” and marketable stories of hardship from tens of thousands of applications weekly. Products and brand names are woven into the melodramatic interventions, and as many critics have noted, complex issues and socioeconomic inequalities are simplified and downplayed. Still, to dismiss these ventures as trivial or somehow less than “real” would be to overlook their constitutive role as technologies of citizenship, private aid, and volunteerism.

On Home Edition, for example, TV viewers are “activated” to practice compassionate citizenship by volunteering for nonprofit partners such as Habitat for Humanity and Home Aid. The ABC Web site provides direct links, publicity on sponsors and partners, advice on getting involved, and tips from volunteer agencies, thus further stitching the production and active consumption of reality TV into privatized networks of assistance and self-care. While often endorsed by public officials, do-good programs circulate as alternatives to the various ills (inefficiency bureaucracy, dependency, centralized control) ascribed to the welfare state. Needy subjects and their problems provide the raw material for the manufacture of entertainment commodities and circulation of advertising that cannot be zapped. The best and only solution to unmet needs and human hardships (private charity) is offloaded onto the private sector and TV viewers. More explicitly than other reality subgenres, the helping trend acknowledges the limitations of self-maximization and pure market logic—and capitalizes on the result.1

Do-good television is especially common on commercial channels in the United States. Although European public broadcasters offer reality-based lessons on living, most lack the resources to intervene directly in reality on a philanthropic scale. Why would the television industry take on such projects, given its historical avoidance of public service obligations? For one thing, do-good experiments are fully expected to be profitable. More importantly, they also allow media outlets to cash in on marketing trends such as “citizen branding” and corporate social responsibility (CSR). Because networks are offered as branded interfaces to suggested civic practices, good citizenship—and the ethical surplus it is assumed to generate—can be harnessed to build consumer loyalty. This makes it possible to differentiate brands of television in a cluttered environment and exploit what business historian David Vogel calls the burgeoning “market for virtue.” For example, ABC (home to many do-good ventures) brands itself as a Better Community, while the reality-based cable channel Planet Green provides a branded interface to green citizenship and environmental problem-solving. Recently, MTV (owned by Viacom) announced its intention to replace trivial reality entertainment with issue-oriented and civic-minded material. Last year, the wealthy debutantes of My Sweet Sixteen were sent to impoverished global locations to improve their character and ethics in a program called Exiled. The contestants on the third season of sister channel VH1’s Charm School are currently being instructed on the importance and procedures of volunteering and performing community service (figure 1). The change is part of MTV and VH1’s efforts to re-brand their programming—and their images—in the wake of young people’s overwhelming support of Barack Obama. Tellingly, Charm School’s off-screen male narrator not only sounds a lot like Obama, he also punctuates the ongoing question of whether the show can transform party girls into “model citizens” with the slogan, “Yes, we can.” As this example attests, the spirit of accountability and

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However market-driven and stitched into the circuitry of privatization, do-good reality programming does provide all-too-rare visibility on U.S. television for the poor, the sick, the unemployed, the homeless, and the uninsured.

Secret Millionaire combines the techniques of the documentary, the social experiment, and the melodrama. Each week, a designated millionaire goes “undercover” into impoverished communities to observe hardship firsthand and give away one hundred thousand dollars of his money (tellingly, the millionaire is almost always white and male) while the cameras roll. The beneficiaries are required to give up their mansions, fancy cars, expensive restaurants, electronic gadgets, and other taken-for-granted consumer privileges and subsist on “welfare wages” like the struggling individuals and families they encounter. They perform hard labor, eat cheap food, live in substandard housing, and interact socially with have-nots, often for the first time in their lives. Along the way, they scout around for people and projects to donate a chunk of their fortune to. Eventually, the expected “reveal” occurs: The millionaire unmasks his true identity and surprises the deserving recipients with a spectacular cash donation.

In the debut episode of the U.S. version, a wealthy California lawyer who is also a successful business owner goes to live among the poor with his teenage son. They perform temporary construction work, reside in a cheap motel, and quickly discover how much they have to learn about the “real world.” What is innovative and potentially disruptive about the program is not its authenticity per se (the artificial conditions and staged aspects of other reality shows are readily apparent) but the alternative manner through which the intervention unfolds. In many respects, the formula draws from and exploits dominant representations of socioeconomic inequality: wealth is individualized, and only those “others” who are judged deserving on the basis of uncontrollable circumstances and/or exemplary character are candidates for assistance. Yet, unlike other do-good television programs, the Secret Millionaire’s purpose is ultimately not to evaluate or make over the poor. Nor is it to shower them with branded consumer goods (courtesy of sponsors) or to enact enterprising solutions to their complex social problems. Its point is to evaluate, educate, guide, enlighten, and transform the richest people in North America. Throughout the debut episode, father and son learn about routine dimensions of socioeconomic difficulties not from experts, but from the experiences and commiserations of people who mistakenly believe they share something in common with the main characters. A middle-aged, uninsured woman who became homeless for a time when she suffered a major back injury provides them breakfast and encouragement. She had subsequently found work at the same construction site and—unaware of their true identity (the cameras are ascribed to a documentary filming)—tries to help the best she can. Another family with a chronically ill child and no health coverage explains the everyday stresses and difficulties of making ends meet and their eventual
slide into bankruptcy. While this constitution of the worthy poor is characteristic of other do-good reality experiments, Secret Millionaire also identifies the undernourished and collapsing public sector as a structural factor in their situations. TV viewers are allowed to identify with shared problems and difficulties that no television program can fix.

The millionaires perform extreme empathy and shock on hearing the hardship stories. As with all reality entertainment, their reactions are shaped and accentuated by casting, editing, camera work, and music. Yet, this artifice does not prevent the series from contributing in potentially useful ways to the “truth” about class and wealth in the current era. In the premiere, father and son undergo a process of self-recognition in which they become increasingly aware of their privilege. They come to see themselves as thoughtless and selfish and are unable to rationalize their “luxury spending” in the midst of unmet human needs and chronic suffering. While this recurring lesson can be easily dismissed as a cultural tempering of growing resentment against the business elites responsible for the current economic crisis, it also reworks the civic logic orienting much of reality TV by reversing the process and subjects of transformation. Within this context, the millionaire’s cash donation can be interpreted as a technology of private aid, but it can also be seen as enacting a reevaluation (if not quite a redistribution) of the allotment of resources and wealth in the United States. The lack of product placements in Secret Millionaire reinforces this possibility—not only because a consumer address is contained in the commercial breaks, but because the problem of uneven wealth cannot be resolved by a trip to Disney World or the installation of a free washing machine. Alas, this lack of marketability will undoubtedly keep the civic possibilities opened up by programs such as Secret Millionaire in check. Such are the limits of reality TV in its current form.

NOTE

1. For a more detailed analysis of the governmental dimensions of do-good TV (from which this article draws), see Ouellette and Hay ch. 1, “Charity TV: Privatizing Care, Mobilizing Compassion.”

WORKS CITED


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