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Television Viewing in the Wake of September 11

Senior Honors Project

Tiffani Saxton
Graduate May 2002

Before September 11, 2001, the world of television had been relatively uninterrupted for almost forty years, since John F. Kennedy was assassinated. Then, it happened. The World Trade Centers disappeared and America was glued to its television sets for days of continuous news coverage. The images of the planes colliding and the Towers falling affected the lives of television viewers forever. Television came into homes and held them in its grip, as it always does – but this time it was not comedy, neither was it fiction, nor artificial reality.

When television programming finally returned to the screens, the citizens of America found themselves changed. Unsure and self-conscious about safety, the public was in mourning. President George W. Bush urged his citizens to pick life back up and beat the terrorists by being normal and doing what had always been done.

At the same time, television executives hammered away in their boardrooms, pulling the plug on some of the seasons anticipated programs and delaying all season premiers. They expected television viewers to abandon reality TV and high-action crime dramas. Scenes shot in airports and of the New York skyline were withdrawn or re-shot.

Prior to September 11, reality television seemed to be the fastest-growing television format in America – much like the game show days of the 1960s and 1970s. In light of the tragedy, critics argued that TV reality shows were lame. CBS's *Survivor* contestants backbiting for a million dollars, NBC's *Fear Factor* contestants eating worms and buffalo testicles for \$50,000, and even MTV's famous spiteful roommates of the *Real World* did not seem to have a place after the attacks.

Based on the Active Theory of Programming/Carter Model (1960), there are three main ideas.¹ The first is that the audience participates in *selection*. They make an active choice of which programs to watch based on the known alternatives, considering their expectations and needs. The second idea in this theory is that viewers partake in *cathection*, reacting on an emotional level to the programming. In this situation, viewers have assumed a relationship and identify with the characters. Thirdly, viewers adopt new belief and behaviors to what they have seen as *reinforcement*. The Uses and Gratifications Theory further assumes that the consumer of media is active and links needs with a choice.² Using these theories as the basis, it can be drawn that, due to the events of September 11, 2001, Americans chose to watch less reality television and turned their focus to more familiar, “comfort” programming.

As the events of the terrorist attacks at the World Trade Center are very recent, minimal detailed research exists in regard to how programming and viewers changed after the tragedy. One view as the smoke began to clear was that there was little that “Americans would find humorous” as sitcoms and late shows returned to the air.³ Late night hosts, Jay Leno and David Letterman were editing their content. Game shows, such as *The Weakest Link*, were limiting questions to non-dismal topics.

When preliminary ratings were released, reality shows performed terribly. ABC snatched *The Mole 2* and NBC withheld *The Runner*, a reality series about a hunted man “running” from his would-be capturers. In second week of October, and during these

¹ Adam, William J. How people watch television as investigated using focus group techniques. *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media*, 44, 78-93. Text from Proquest Order: 413258960.

² According to Dr. Catherine Luther, Professor of Broadcasting at the University of Tennessee, Broadcasting 450 lecture (January 29, 2002).

³ Johnson, Ben P. (2001, October 26) America Bites (Back): Can Survivor Survive? *CultureKiosque.com*. Retrieved April 23, 2002, from <http://www.culturekiosque.com/nouveau/tele/realityshows.html>.

times when network dramas have also dominated airways, *Survivor* was the only reality and drama show in the top ten.⁴ However, it plummeted by the end of the month and was replaced by NBC's *Friends*.

Friends quickly became an American classic after its debut in the 1994-1995 television season. Women quickly ran to their salons for the "Rachel" haircut and fans cried when she broke up with Ross a few seasons later. They cheered for the wedding of Chandler and Monica, and sympathized with a pregnant Phoebe as she carried her brother's triplets. Joey's phrases have found their way into America's real coffee shops. This is one of those shows where Americans have become actively involved in its programming. Fans identify with the weekly dramas of the Friends' lives. They have certain expectations of the characters and adopt new behaviors based on the episodes. Immensely popular shows like this, and also CBS's *Everybody Loves Raymond*, NBC's *Will & Grace*, NBC's *Law and Order*, are comfort shows.

During weeks following September 11, ratings revealed that comfort shows had performed better than they had the week before the events – even though premier week had been pushed into the next month.⁵ Nielsen's October ratings showed that *Everybody Loves Raymond* and *Law & Order* had premiered at their highest season-opener ever.⁶

Reality series like CBS's *Amazing Race* and NBC's *The Lost* teetered far behind.⁷ The networks had high expectations of these shows, as they debuted before September 11

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Kissell, Rick. (2001, October 1) Fall shows still draw in viewers. *Variety*. Text from FindArticles.com. Retrieved April 16, 2002 from http://www.findarticles.com/cf_brdcble/m1312/7_384/79128110/print.jhtml.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

with “respectable ratings”.⁸ “According to an Initiative Media Survey conducted after September 11, 56.6 percent of Americans are ‘less interested’ in watching reality programs.”⁹ The terrorist attacks had America on the edge; reality shows had lost their purpose. Viewers were returning to their favorites.

They not only returned to their current favorites, but TV watchers revisited old favorites, as well. “Viewers took refuge in vintage entertainment programming, perhaps to allay fears and uncertainties over the new U.S. war on terrorism.”¹⁰ Viacom’s TV Land showed a 33 percent jump in ratings for November, compared to Nielsen statistics a year prior. TV Land features classics like *I Love Lucy*, *The Love Boat*, and *The Andy Griffith Show*. According to Larry Jones, TV Land executive and vice president, those are “pre-eminent shows for escapism, and audiences have flocked to them” (as cited in Umstead, 2001, December 17).

Nick at Nite, the primetime segment on Nickelodeon, which features *Cheers*, *Family Ties*, and *The Brady Bunch*, shot up seven percent from October 1 to November 30. The Game Show Network, airing “vintage game shows such as *Let’s Make a Deal*, saw primetime ratings spike up ten percent in the weeks following September 11.”¹¹ These numbers, however, do not come at the expense of other networks, according to vice president of research at Lifetime Entertainment Services, Tim Brooks (as cited in

⁸ Schollosser, Joe. (2001, October 1) America stays at home. *Broadcasting & Cable*. Text from FindArticles.com. Retrieved April 16, 2002 from http://www.findarticles.com/cf_brdcble/m0BCA/41_131/78973940/print.jhtml.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Umstead, R. Thomas. (2001, December 17) Vintage Shows Spur Gains for Nets. *Multichannel News*. Text from FindArticles.com. Retrieved April 16, 2002 from http://www.findarticles.com/cf_brdcble/m3535/51_22/80933333/print.jhtml.

¹¹ Ibid.

Umstead, 2001, December 17). Instead, The “nostalgia channels” are stealing audiences from “less familiar series and specials.”¹²

While the months following September 11 showed a shift in American television viewing behavior, it was expected that it was only a matter of time before things were back to normal and the tragedies were no longer the lead story. In a 1995 telephone survey, Mary Beth Oliver and G. Black Armstrong found that frequent viewing of reality-based shows is related to certain attitudes.¹³ Is it possible to speculate that viewing of comfort shows also relate to certain attitudes? In a time of mourning and sorrow, comfort is exactly what America needed. In time, America is finding that comfort and *Survivor* is back in the top ten. There may be “something reassuring about watching people overcome hardship, even if it is manufactured, and escape danger, however contrived.”¹⁴

Television is permanently ingrained in the American culture. It joins in by invitation and intrusion. It will forever be a part of the joys, sorrows, comedies, and dramas of American history. In exchange, it will take that history and make its viewers apart of its stories. Therefore it now only affects lives; it is also affected by them. A relationship exists as it comforts, reminds, teaches, and dreams with its audience. Television is active and therefore has significance. September 11, and the months that followed, indicate that to be very true.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Oliver, Mary Beth, and Armstrong, G. Blake. (1995) Predictors of viewing and enjoyment of reality-based and fictional crime shows. *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly*, 72, (3, Autumn), 559-570.

¹⁴ Weintraub, Joanne. (2001, September 26) Reality TV really does have its place. *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* [online version]. Retrieved April 23, 2002 from <http://www.jsonline.com/enter/tvradio/sep01/weincol27092601a.asp>.

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Tiffani J. Saxton
Senior Honors Project

Before September 11

Uninterrupted TV since JFK
assassination (11/1963)
CNN dominated the 24 hour news
market, but most focused on local
coverage
Reality television popular format – new
series and shows slated for every
network throughout the season

Active Theory of Programming (1960)

Selection

- Active choice based on known alternatives
- Accounts for expectations, needs, & expected benefits

Cathexion - warmth of assumed relationship
and identifying with characters

Reinforcement – viewers *adopt* new
beliefs/behaviors to what they have seen

Uses & Gratifications Theory

Consumer is active
Consumer links need with a choice

Theory

Due to the events of September 11, 2001,
Americans chose to watch less reality
television and turned their focus to more
familiar, "comfort" programming.

Changes from Within

Network and Film execs begin to cut
certain images out of TV & movies
Late night shows (Leno, Letterman,
etc.) and game shows edit content
Premier weeks pushed into October
Emmy's & other awards shows
canceled/postponed
Sports canceled

Reality shows = poor ratings

- *The Mole* (ABC) & *The Runner* (NBC) canceled
- *The Amazing Race* (CBS) & *The Lost* (ABC) premiered with respectable ratings before 9/11, but teetered in October
- *Survivor* (CBS) only reality show in top 10, then plummeted
- 56.6% of Americans less interested in reality TV (Initiative Media Survey)

SURVIVOR

America's Favorites

Friends (NBC), *Law & Order* (NBC),
Everybody Loves Raymond (CBS)

- Classics since beginnings
- Fans identify with characters
- Expectations of the characters
- Audience adopts new behaviors

"Comfort Shows" biggest season-opener ever

Vintage Favorites



"TV Land" jumped 33% compared to last year

"Nick at Nite" shot up 7% from Oct. 1-Nov. 30 primetime

"Game Show Network" spiked up 11% in following weeks of 9/11

Oliver & Armstrong Telephone Survey (1995)

Frequent viewing of reality-based shows is related to certain attitudes. Is it possible to speculate that viewing of comfort shows also relate to certain attitudes? In a time of mourning and sorrow, comfort is exactly what America needed.

In Conclusion...

Television is permanently ingrained in the American culture. It will forever be a part of the joys, sorrows, comedies, and dramas of American history. In exchange, it will take that history and make its viewers apart of its stories. Therefore it now only affects lives; it is also affected by them. A relationship exists as it comforts, reminds, teaches, and dreams with its audience. September 11, and the months that followed, indicate that to be very true.