Obsessive Repulsive

By Will Self
New Statesman, May 14, 2012

Compulsive hoarding is pretty out there, no? I mean what kind of a weirdo saves all that cardboard and bubble wrap, ties it up with string and wedges it in on top of crappy old wing chairs and fake-veneer TV cabinets stacked high with bundles of old newspapers and books, then tops the whole teetering pile off with 30-or-so cat litter trays (full), leaving the felines themselves—perhaps 40 of them—to smarm along the alleys carved through this dreck (for this is but one room of an entire semi so engorged), shitting and pissing wherever?

A complete weirdo—that's who. And these people, together with their odd pathology, are of increasing interest to the general population, as is evidenced by the arrival on these shores of the British version of *Hoarders*, a US documentary series about compulsive hoarders that has already been running over there for four seasons and is currently embarking on its fifth. Not that this is Brit TV's first foray under the sinks of the seriously possessive—there was a standalone docco, *Obsessive Compulsive Hoarder* on Channel 4 back in 2011—and it may be because I'm taken by the phenomenon (a hoarder of programmes about compulsive hoarders) that it seems to me that I've snapped on the set on a number of other occasions only to find the camera's lens nosing along a skirting board behind which are stuffed sheaths of old discount coupons.

Marching Hoarders

Wherefrom comes this urge to expose such traumatic interiors? After all, hoarding can be nothing new—it's easy to imagine a Cyclops's cavern stuffed to the roof with sheep bones, cheese rinds and the remains of hapless Argonauts. The splurge of reality obesity shows the explanation is simple: schadenfreude. We look upon those poor wobblers being shaken to their core by life coaches and think to ourselves, I may be a little on the tubby side but—Jesus!—I'm not that bad. Actually, my suspicion is that the compulsive hoarder craziness is an even more craven attempt to affect such a catharsis. As the crack team of cleaners goes into the bungalow, black bags and bug spray at the ready, we sit on the sofa watching and, for a few dreamy minutes, can forget all about the landfill-in-waiting that surrounds us.

Every morning of my serene existence I open the door to my writing room and think, I can't stand this! It's an avalanche crushing me! The box files full of papers, the shelves piled with books (the floor piled with books), the desk stacked with

unanswered correspondence, the desk lamps corralled by tchotchkes—old toys, plastic figurines, broken watches, stones I've picked up as mementoes of the places I've been and yet forgotten, foreign coins, pine cones—the space below the desk humped with boxes full of camping gear all coiled in dust-furred computer cabling … Aaaargh! I want to scream, because there's no point in turning away from it, for there are scores of books not simply unread but which I will never read. Just as in the pantry there are bay leaves I will never put in a casserole, and in the shed there are trowels that neither I—nor anyone else—will ever delve with.

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Sticky Moments

Yes, I know there are those who exhibit a different pathology: their homes are pristine, their socks are colour-coded, the second they acquire something superfluous they organise a tabletop sale. But the rest of us are charged with some sort of unearthly static electricity that makes paper clips, hairpins, half-used Sellotape rolls (especially the ones where you cannot detach the tape even after hours of flicking at it under operating-theatre-strength lighting), local newspapers, tins of baked beans missing their labels, jump leads, hair rollers, half-used tubes of athlete's foot cream, half-popped packs of headache pills, broken folding chairs, Jiffy bags, VHS tapes, etcetera, etcetera, et-bloody-cetera cling to us with terrifying inertia.

If you stand on the banks of the Thames east of Gravesend, roughly where Pip met Magwitch and Boris wants to build an airport, you can watch as giant container ships loaded with discarded electrical goods set out on the ebb tide for China, where all these washing machines, computers and consoles will be recycled into useful appliances for their upwardly mobile rural poor. Some might take heart at this—not I. I see the earth as a compulsive hoarder, spinning through the endless night of space, snaffling up meteorites as she goes.

What's Right with Reality TV

By James Poniewozik
Time, February 22, 2010

Ten years since the premiere of Survivor*, the genre has gone from guilty pleasure to quintessentially American entertainment*

The first thing you notice on MTV's *Jersey Shore* is the nicknames. Well, that and the hair, and the thongs, and the leathery tans, and the tattoos, and the hair gel, and the hot-tub sex, and the bar brawls, and the lustily embraced Italian-American stereotypes. But then: those nicknames. There's Nicole (Snooki) Polizzi. Mike (The Situation) Sorrentino. And most spectacularly, Jenni (Jwoww) Farley. For future copy editors of academic histories of mass media, that's two syllables, hyphen optional, and three w's, not in a row.

Like the tetragrammatic name of God, the moniker Jwoww has encoded in it everything you need to understand the world we live in today. The idea that an unknown 23-year-old from Long Island would come equipped with a tabloid-ready exclamatory nickname, like J. Lo or P. Diddy, might, in a more self-effacing era, have seemed presumptuous. Now it's just commonsense branding. If you might be on a reality show, you may as well have a name that pops and precedes you like a well-positioned set of silicone implants. (Oh, also: you should get the implants too.)

For the cast of *Jersey Shore*—gearing up to shoot Season 2 in the next few months—camera-readiness is second nature. These are the children of reality TV. In February 1992—literally a generation ago—*The Real World* introduced MTV's viewers to living in public. Ten years ago, *Survivor*—now in its 20th season—mainstreamed the idea for older viewers. *The Jersey Shore*-ites have never known a world in which hooking up drunk in a house paid for by a Viacom network was not an option. This year in the coveted post–Super Bowl time slot, CBS showcased not a new drama or sitcom but its reality series *Undercover Boss.* (The premiere attracted 38.6 million viewers, the most for a post–Super Bowl show since *Survivor: The Australian Outback* in 2001.) In March, Jerry Seinfeld returns to NBC—as producer of the reality show *The Marriage Ref*.

Reality is more than a TV genre now. It's the burgeoning career field that led Richard Heene to perpetrate the Balloon Boy hoax, and Tareq and Michaele Salahi to crash a White House dinner, Bravo TV cameras in tow. It's the content mill for the cable-tabloid-blog machine, employing human punch lines like Rod Blagojevich, the disgraced governor turned contestant on *Celebrity Apprentice*. It's everywhere.

From *Time* 175.7 (22 Feb. 2010): 92–97.

When Scott Brown won an upset Senate victory in Massachusetts, he was joined onstage by his daughter Ayla, an *American Idol* semifinalist from Season 5.

In 1992, reality TV was a novelty. In 2000, it was a fad. In 2010, it's a way of life.

The Evolution of a Genre

The summer of the first *Survivor* season, I wrote a cover story about it for this magazine [Time]. The concerns that the show's popularity raised seem so quaint now: a professor worried its success would lead to "Let's try a public execution. Let's try a snuff film." We're still waiting for those. But *Survivor* is still on—considered, together with the likes of *Idol* and *The Amazing Race*, to be relatively tame, even family-oriented entertainment.

At the time, there were a handful of reality shows on TV. Since then, we've seen 20 *Survivors*, 16 *Amazing Races* and 14 *The Bachelors*. We've seen *Chains of Love*, *Rock of Love*, *Flavor of Love* and *Conveyor Belt of Love*. *American Candidate*, *American Gladiators* and *American Inventor*. *Anna Nicole*, *Kathy Griffin* and *Britney & Kevin*. *Design Star*, *Rock Star*, *Nashville Star* and *Dancing with the Stars*. *Joe Millionaire*, *Average Joe* and *The Joe Schmo Show*. *Shark Tank* and *Whale Wars*, *The Mole* and *The Swan*. *Fear Factor*, *The It Factor* and *The Benefactor*. (Coming in 2011: Simon Cowell's *The X Factor*!)

You can break down reality TV roughly into two major subgenres. The first—the big competition-event show—descends from *Survivor* and includes most of reality's big hits: *Idol*, *The Bachelor*, *The Amazing Race*, *The Biggest Loser*, *Project Runway*. These shows mainstreamed reality TV for bigger, broader (and older) audiences by applying it to familiar genres: game shows, singing competitions, cook-offs, dating shows.

The other type of reality show descends from *The Real World*'s naked voyeurism. Some of these shows are about celebrities, former celebrities or pseudo celebrities. Some are about therapy, about work or about parenting. And many are just about life. Bravo's *Real Housewives* series is still spreading across the country like *Cheesecake Factory* franchises. (The Salahis snuggled up to the President as candidates for *The Real Housewives of D.C.*) When Jon and Kate Gosselin drew 10 million viewers to watch their marriage end on TLC, reality TV proved it wasn't going into middle age quietly.

From Personality to Persona

Big as reality TV is, it's also just a facet of a larger shift in popular culture: changing attitudes toward privacy and self-expression. If you grew up with reality TV and the Internet, your default setting is publicity, not privacy. Mark Zuckerberg, the founder of Facebook, recently argued that sharing has become the "social norm."

Zuckerberg was defending a controversial change in Facebook's privacy settings to make the company's trove of user information more valuable. Still, he has hundreds of millions of users and their college beer-bong photos proving his point every day. Facebook's competitor Twitter is a worldwide agora of valuable information and TMI. You can make your tweets private if you want, but why would you?

Thus comes what you might call the realitization of reality: the evolution of once private, or at least obscure, acts into performance. The diary becomes the blog. The home-movie collection becomes the YouTube channel. The résumé becomes the public search-result page.

And the personality becomes the persona. Every time you sign up for a new social-networking service, you make decisions about, literally, who you want to be. You package yourself—choose an avatar, pick a name, state your status—not unlike a storyteller creating a character or a publicist positioning a client. You can be professional on LinkedIn, flippant on Facebook and epigrammatic on Twitter. What's more, each of these representations can be very different and yet entirely authentic. Like a reality producer in a video bay, you edit yourself to fit the context.

In the workplace, for more than a decade, job-insecure Americans have been told to cultivate "the brand called you." Decide what your strengths are. Focus on your core competencies. Be aware of the bullet points of your identity. The message of both business and leisure today is, Distinguish between the actual and the for-public-consumption self.

Put all these factors together, and reality TV's endless stream of candidates seems inevitable. Every winter, *American Idol*'s audition rounds attract a deluge of self-created characters, who have the formula for getting on national TV down to a science. "I'm the crazy accordion lady/ This is my song," yowls a blue-haired young woman cradling a squeeze-box. The advanced descendants of the costumed screwballs who tried to get Monty Hall's attention on *Let's Make a Deal*, today's reality performance artists put on virtual costumes—the Bitch, the Horndog, the Drama Queen—to get noticed. In reality TV, privacy and even likability are commodities that can be traded for something more valuable.

Which is? Reality TV is now a valid career choice. The *New York Times* estimated that at any given time, there are 1,000 people on air as reality TV stars. (That may not seem like a huge number, but compared with, let's say, full-time TV critics, it's quite a healthy field.) For a few talented individuals—say, *Idol*'s Kelly Clarkson or the cooks of *Top Chef*—this has made possible actual real-life opportunity. Jennifer Hudson lost on *Idol* but won an Oscar as an actress. Elisabeth Hasselbeck went from eating bugs on *Survivor* to chewing out Joy Behar on *The View*.

And for others, it has enabled a life of lucrative famousness for famousness. Members of the cast of *The Hills*, for instance, reportedly earn up to $90,000 an episode; the *Real Housewives*, about $30,000. *Hills* star Heidi Montag has released an album, launched a clothing line, even, God help us, co-written a book. Co-star Audrina Patridge at one point received $10,000 to party at a nightclub for two hours. Reality star Kim Kardashian reportedly nets $10,000 for each product she endorses on Twitter. How much money did you make in the last 30 seconds?

Will Offend for Fame

Of course, you don't reach that level of success without working for it. Kardashian, for instance, didn't get her show until a sex tape of her and an R&B singer became public. Which is another lesson of reality TV: outrageousness pays.

And the more reality TV there is, the more outrageous you have to be to break out. Nadya Suleman, or Octomom, parlayed a horrifyingly dangerous multiple birth into a reality special, ending up—like her apparent model, Angelina Jolie—on the cover of *Star* magazine, showing off "My New Bikini Body! How I Did It!" Richard Heene convinced the world that his 6-year-old son was hurtling toward his death in a balloon. But as the veteran of ABC's *Wife Swap* knew, the show he was pitching—eccentric storm-chasing scientist and his wacky family—wouldn't even raise an eyebrow on a cable schedule.

But what message is it all sending? The viralization of people like American Idol's General Larry (Pants on the Ground) Platt and William Hung before him has led to the charge that reality TV invites us to laugh at little people for sport. The fame of Jersey Shore's tanning-bed casualties and others brings the critique that reality TV celebrates violence, sluttiness (male and female) and other bad behavior.

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These charges are so contradictory as to cancel each other out. How, exactly, can reality TV mock its participants and celebrate them at the same time? In fact, the audience's relation to reality shows is more complicated. People don't watch *Jersey Shore* because they consider the Situation a role model. It's entertaining because the show is basically satire, a pumped-up spoof of bigger-is-better American culture. (Quoth Jwoww: "I see a bunch of, like, gorilla juice heads, tall, completely jacked, steroid, like multiple growth hormone—that's, like, the type I'm attracted to.")

One of the biggest proponents of the idea that reality TV appeals to the worst in us is … reality TV. Case in point, Susan Boyle. When she showed up, unpolished and dowdy, and blew the doors off *Britain's Got Talent* in her singing audition, it was hailed as a sign that we were finally getting sick of the ugly, snarky culture of reality TV. Did you see her wipe the smirk off Simon Cowell's face? The judges were ready to laugh at her, but she showed them that looks aren't everything! Well, yes, except that Boyle's entire "subversion" of reality TV was set up, framed and milked by a reality show.

Reality shows showcase plenty of bad behavior, but they also presume a heavy moralism on the part of the audience. *Survivor* is known for its self-rationalizing, situational ethics. Anything you do to win can be justified as playing the game. But part of the reason fans become involved in the show is that they get invested in the good guys and bad guys.

Look at the title of *Survivor*'s 10th-anniversary season, starting this month: "Heroes vs. Villains"—that is, those who played decently vs. those who "just played the game." Plenty of fans were entertained by Richard Hatch, who lied his way to the first-season title (often while buck naked). But a million dollars and one tax-evasion conviction later, do they admire him?

The main dangers of reality TV aren't to the viewers but to the participants and those around them. The Heenes were lucky the Balloon Boy hoax was just embarrassing and not deadly. But the sleaziest, and saddest, aspect of their whole story was the implication that their kids were being raised to think it was all a normal thing that people do to help the family business. As Falcon Heene blurted to his dad on *Larry King Live*, "You guys said that we did this for the show."

DJ Adam Goldstein, a.k.a. DJ AM, died last year of an overdose resulting from a drug relapse—while making a reality show about drug abuse for MTV that brought him close to his old temptations. NBC's *The Biggest Loser* casts ever heftier contestants and subjects them to ever-more-stressful challenges, to the point where it seems a competitive-eating reality show would be healthier. Sometimes it's the producers, not the viewers, who could use the reminder that it's not O.K. to do whatever it takes to win the (ratings) game.

Why Reality TV Is Us

But there's more to reality TV than fame-crazy lunatics, 'roid-raging meatheads and silicone drama queens wearing little more than craftily deployed censors' pixelation. A decade after *Survivor*, reality TV has become too vast and diverse a genre to be defined by any one set of especially lousy shows. And for all of everyone's worries 10 years ago, reality TV hasn't crowded "quality shows" off the air. The past 10 years of scripted shows—*The Wire*, *Battlestar Galactica*, *The Office*, *Mad Men*—are the strongest TV has ever had. (One genre that reality may be crowding out is soap operas. *As the World Turns* is ending, as did *Guiding Light*, their appeal supplanted by the immersive serial dramas of *Jon & Kate*, among others.)

In the best cases, reality and scripted television have reached a kind of symbiosis. It's not just that reality shows have learned to structure themselves like sitcoms and dramas. Many of the best TV shows of the '00s lift heavily from reality TV or would have been impossible without it.

Lost, for instance, began as an attempt to create a drama version of *Survivor*. Several of TV's best comedies—the American and British versions of *The Office*, *Parks and Recreation*, *Arrested Development* and *Modern Family*—have borrowed directly from reality TV's format of vérité filmmaking and "confessional" interviews with the characters.

Maybe the best example yet of the reality-fiction alliance is Fox's high school choir spoof *Glee*, which, in essence, is *American Idol* in teen-dramedy form. It is a literal re-creation of the pop appeal of *Idol* (just like *Idol*'s, *Glee*'s songs fly to the top of iTunes on a weekly basis). And it's also a critique of the *American Idol* culture that made it possible. In the words of Rachel (Lea Michele), "Nowadays, being anonymous is worse than being poor."

The best reality shows can be much more engrossing, complex and diverse than your average TV cop show. Last year *The Amazing Race* included the team of bisexual screenwriter Mike White and his gay minister father Mel White, giving a more nuanced, less stereotypical portrayal of both sexual orientation and faith than most big-network dramas would.

The past decade has seen experiments like documentary maker Morgan Spurlock's *30 Days* for FX, a brilliant trading-places switcheroo. (For instance, an anti-immigration militant spent a month living the life of an illegal alien.) *Wife Swap* is an intriguing show about American subcultures (homeschoolers, political activists, etc.) and the natural tendency of parents to secretly judge one another. TLC's *19 Kids and Counting*, about the fecund Duggars, may be an extreme-parenting freak show, but it's also a series about the life of a deeply religious family, a rare subject for TV dramas today.

Even MTV, home of *Jersey Shore*, has the high-minded *16 and Pregnant* (which often features working-class families, who scarcely exist in network drama nowadays); *The Buried Life*, about four friends who travel the world helping people accomplish things they want to do before they die; and *My Life as Liz*, a sort of reality *My So-Called Life* about a high school outcast in small-town Texas.

Are any of these MTV shows as big or as widely hyped as *Jersey Shore* (which got nearly 5 million viewers for its season finale)? No. But that is on you and me, not on reality TV. And even in the cheesiest reality shows, there is an aspirational quality, a democratic quality, a quality that's—yeah, I'll say it—American. "American" in the sense that what is true of countries is true of TV genres: their worst traits are inseparable from their best ones.

In the basic criticism of reality TV—that it makes people famous for nothing rather than rewarding hard work—is a Puritan streak that is as old as Plymouth Rock: Seek thou not the Folly of Celebrity, but apply thyself with Humility to thy Industry! Well, that's one strain of American values. But there are other American ideas that reality TV taps into: That everybody should have a shot. That sometimes being real is better than being polite. That no matter where you started out, you can hit it big, get lucky and reinvent yourself. In her own way, Jwoww is as American a character as the nobody Jay Gatsby heading east and changing his name.

And most important, that you can find something interesting in the lives of people other than celebrities, lawyers and doctors. In CBS's new *Undercover Boss*, executives go incognito to work in entry-level jobs in their companies. In the premiere, Larry O'Donnell, president and COO of Waste Management, picks up litter and cleans toilets. He learns that a woman driving a garbage route has to pee in a coffee can to keep on schedule; trash sorters are docked two minutes' pay for every minute they're late from their half-hour lunch. He's horrified; he's humbled; he vows to help his workers out.

There's plenty to criticize in *Undercover Boss*. The show is moving but it's also manipulative and infuriating. Yes, O'Donnell hands out raises and rewards to the nice people we've met. It makes him (and us) feel good. But company-wide—economy-wide—there's no reason to believe things will get better for the overstressed workers who didn't get on TV.

But here's the thing: you, watching the show, have the tools to come to that conclusion. You've held a job. You know how companies work. And one thing reality TV has trained people to do is to be savvy about its editing. That's how people watch reality TV: you can doubt it, interrogate it, talk back to it, believe it, or not.

And either way, what you're left with is a prime-time TV show about topical concerns, at a time when people would like to see some humility in our CEOs; a show, like Discovery's *Dirty Jobs*, about toilet cleaners and garbage pickers and other people that "quality TV" rarely takes notice of; a show, at heart, about how absolutely crazy-hard ordinary people work.

You also—in the worn-out but cheerful employees—see a testimony to the incredible camera-readiness of the American public. How did O'Donnell manage to work unsuspected among his employees? He told them he was "Randy," a host making a reality show, natch, about entry-level jobs.

And what could be more natural than that? What could be more normal, in an age of ubiquitous media, than to take a stranger for a ride on your garbage truck and complain about your supervisors to the cameras? TV calls, and you must answer. It is as if, as a society, we had been singing in front of a mirror for generations, only to discover that now the mirror can actually see us. And if we are really lucky, it might just offer us a show.