

The Relative Value of Reality Television by Jamie Janosz

Why are we drawn to reality television?

It started innocently enough with *Candid Camera* in 1948. The popular show captured ordinary people being tricked into funny situations. After the joke, the person would be let into the secret that they were not alone, but on television – their foolishness revealed for all to see.

People loved *Candid Camera*. And, with that hit show, reality television was born.

It resurged in the 80s with the angry debacle of *The Jerry Springer Show*. On this show, the extreme conflicts of humanity were revealed. Private disputes were displayed on stage for everyone to see. Hair pulling, clothing being ripped. It was more exciting than a hockey game.

In the 90s and until today, reality shows continue to flourish, everything from *Survivor* to *the Apprentice*, *American Idol*, and *Dancing with the Stars*. The topics and assignments vary – but people are drawn to the basic formula.

This year, the reality show *Jon and Kate Plus 8* – a sweet show about a couple dealing with life and 8 young children--took a tumble. Jon and Kate Gosselin were undergoing a marital crisis – and it did not go unnoticed by the cameras. The show, which usually focused on the children, and a small amount of spousal bickering, became focused on Jon and Kate.

Accusations flew about infidelity. Add to this the complication of Kate's testimony among the Christian community. It was hard to ignore, and even harder not to watch.

In fact, ratings for the show's premiere soared. Their marital discord – their family crisis – was GOOD television. *Jon & Kate Plus 8's* fifth-season premiere averaged 9.8 million overall viewers. The show was even more successful because of their struggles.

Why are we drawn to reality television? Furthermore, why are we especially drawn to witness other people's troubles?

On some level, it is like slowing down to observe an accident on a highway. We are curious! We want to know what happened. Perhaps, in an odd way, we find it comforting to know that we are not alone in our sin and dysfunction.

These people, like Jon and Kate, whose lives seem a bit more glamorous because they are on TV – are revealed to be not better than us at all. They are just ordinary people. They are a couple who argues and fights and has bad nights and nasty tempers. We are not alone in our sinful condition.

One critic says that "reality television exploits ordinary people who are not able to prepare before being placed in front of the spotlight." He suggests that the audience becomes participants in voyeurism, delighting in the mental and physical harm done to these individuals.

Ravi Zacharias, a Christian writer and scholar, observes that television makes people emotionally insensitive. There is a desensitization process that inevitably sets in. The viewer needs more and more and gets stimulated less and less.

Supporters of reality TV say the genre offers a fresh and energetic look at life. It elevates ordinary men and women to stardom and promotes honesty. One Christian critic says that reality TV actually does a better job of portraying Christians than scripted television does. It allows us to see families in action and real life circumstances, not just attending church or praying.

As a Christian viewer, should we watch reality television? What is our response to this type of show that offers excitement, honesty and a look into other people's private lives? One writer asks an even tougher question: Is it a virtual sin to watch and sometimes enjoy other people's struggles?

We need to ask those questions. We need to be wary of both desensitization and developing the judgmental attitude of the Pharisees. We are called by Christ to show love and compassion to those in trouble. We should be praying for Jon and Kate, not glorifying their demise.

The people we watch in reality shows are actual people –and their troubles do not end when the camera shuts off. They are people like you and I, in need of God's grace and forgiveness and redemption.

Those are my thoughts; what do you think? I'm Jamie Janosz for *Prime Time America*.