

Guilty Pleasures and Cultural Legitimation: Exploring High-Status Reality TV in the Postnetwork Era

MICHAEL L. WAYNE

THE PROLIFERATION OF ORIGINAL PROGRAMMING ON CABLE NETWORKS and the emergence of digital technologies has led some observers to claim that contemporary American television is in the midst of its third golden age (the first two are associated with the 1950s and 1980s, respectively). While critics praise the literary qualities of shows like *The Sopranos*, *The Wire*, *Mad Men*, and *Breaking Bad*, reality TV “has inherited the rotten reputation that once attached to the medium itself” as shows like MTV’s *Jersey Shore* “still provide a fat target for anyone seeking symptoms or causes of American idiocy” (Sanneh). In fact, reality shows are largely omitted from discussions addressing television’s rising cultural status.

Nevertheless, in the context of the criticism directed at reality TV as a genre, one basic cable network is frequently celebrated for producing television’s best reality shows. According to the trade publication *Advertising Age*, A&E is “the premiere destination for unscripted programs that are authentic and relatable.” In describing the network, a *New York Times* critic writes, “From *Intervention* and *The First 48* to *Beyond Scared Straight* and *Heavy*, these are well made, compulsively watchable series” (Hale). By highlighting the ways in which these programs rely upon problematic hierarchies that equate classed notions of reflexivity with moral worth, this article argues that the relative legitimacy of *Intervention* and *Beyond Scared Straight* depends on these shows’ ability to extract middle-class-appropriate behavior from socially marginal participants.

Reality TV in the Postnetwork Era

In responding to those who claim television has qualitatively improved in recent years, Michael Z. Newman and Elana Levine argue that postnetwork legitimacy requires the support of cultural elites who invest “the medium with aesthetic and other prized values, nudging it closer to more established arts and cultural forms and preserving their own privileged status in return” (7). Unlike the crassly commercial network-era executive producer commanding a team of writers and creating content appealing to “a multiplicity of social types at once” (Gitlin 248), the postnetwork “showrunner” more closely resembles the traditional film director—“an *auteur*: an artist of unique vision whose experiences and personality are expressed through storytelling craft” (Newman and Levine 38). Similarly, the status of single-camera situation comedies like NBC’s *The Office* and ABC’s *Modern Family* is related to the belief that this visual style is more cinematic than multiple-camera shows like CBS’s *Two and a Half Men* (Newman and Levine 64). In the case of prime-time dramas shown on premium cable channels like *The Sopranos* on HBO, the absence of commercial interruptions allow these texts to “seem cinematic” in comparison to typical network dramas (Newman and Levine 135). Newman and Levine, however, do not address reality TV in the context of the medium’s increasing cultural legitimacy other than to describe the genre as “the most culturally degraded programming of the 2000’s” (126). This is understandable as, unlike the “high-minded” focus of documentary cinema (Murray 68), “what ties together all the various formats of the reality TV genre is their professed abilities to more fully provide viewers an unmediated, voyeuristic, and yet often playful look into what might be called the ‘entertaining real’” (Murray and Ouellette 5).

Furthermore, professional television critics believe reality programming lacks artistic merit. As one critic noted in a recent review of Lifetime’s *Bristol Palin: Life’s a Tripp*, “The reality show template was pretty much set with MTV’s *The Real World*, which put a bunch of hot young people in a house and filmed what happened. . . . All reality shows have followed this format—*Big Brother*, *The Bachelorette*, *The Real Housewives*, *Survivor* ad infinitum” (David). Such critical understandings leave little room for allowing that reality TV texts are cre-

ative expressions of a showrunner's talent and unique vision. And, unlike professional actors, participants featured on reality TV are not considered artists. Alessandra Stanley, for example, describes the participants on Bravo's *The Real Housewives of Orange County* as "self-indulgent middle-aged women" performing "a menopausal minstrel show" ("The Classless" A1). Critics also assume reality programming is fraudulent. As one notes, "From bait-and-switch marriage proposals to wig-pulling, cocktail-tossing catfights, it's safe to say we've grown accustomed to absurd contrivance and scripting in 'reality' television" (Friedman). This falseness, however, extends well beyond the production process as "when the reality stars leave their fake rented house, they need to parade around town maintaining the character they play on the show" (Mihalsky). Even those who enjoy reality TV frequently mention its devalued status; references to vaudeville (Heffernan, "Revamping Reality") and "train wreck" entertainment (Rorke) are common.

In addition, critics consider reality TV a fundamentally exploitative enterprise. Virginia Heffernan, for example, writes, "But, like game-show contestants, most reality participants lose. And on reality shows, they lose *what they came in with*—their marriages, their families, their cultural capital, their professional reputations, their actual money and in some cases their freedom" ("Revamping Reality"). Marybeth Hicks similarly observes, "*Jersey Shore* is just one more example of MTV's exploitation of young adults in an effort to chase ratings, while at the same time promoting dangerous, destructive, immoral and unhealthy behaviors like binge drinking, illegal drug use, promiscuous sex, foul language and now, it appears, excessive tanning." Critics find this exploitation particularly problematic in reality TV shows featuring children. Writing of the short-lived NBC series *The Baby Borrowers*, Teresa Wiltz notes, "Hollywood has long exploited, and sometimes endangered, child actors; now critics contend that the industry is courting controversy by doing the same to 'real-life' kids—that is, children who lack both Screen Actors Guild cards and, it seems, overprotective parents" (A1).

In relation to television's increasing cultural legitimacy, this absence of critical support for reality TV as a genre has important implications. As Baumann observes regarding twentieth-century cinema, while the social processes associated with increasing legitimacy include institutional and organizational factors such as the develop-

ment of university film departments and relaxed censorship standards, by using “vocabulary and techniques resembling those used in other highbrow artistic criticism” and approaching Hollywood film as “art rather than entertainment” (159), “critics helped film achieve the status of art” (157). Yet, the significance of critical evaluation, as Bourdieu argues, is limited by the degree to which the critic and the audience share a “view of the social world” (240). In the context of the “upper-middle culture” associated with high-status professions and “[those] who have attended the ‘better’ colleges and universities” (Gans 106), critics are particularly important because they help differentiate between class-appropriate content and “lower middle” content thought “too clichéd and ‘vulgar’” (109). If postnetwork reality TV is understood by upper-middle-class taste-makers like television critics as distasteful, fake, and socially irresponsible, then the elevated status of any reality text is necessarily related to the ways in which it separates itself from these denigrated norms.

Elite Discourse, A&E, and the Late-Modern Self

Like many cable networks, A&E’s brand identity has changed substantially since its inception. Founded in 1984 as the “Arts & Entertainment Network,” in 2008, borrowing from the success of subscriber-based cable network HBO’s tag-line, “It’s not TV,” A&E began promising audiences qualitatively superior reality TV by explicitly linking itself to an unspecified albeit more legitimate cultural form with the slogan, “Real life. Drama” (“About”). Since this latest rebranding, industry discourse, including network descriptions of the shows and statements from producers in trade papers such as *Variety*, actively distinguishes *Intervention* and *Beyond Scared Straight* from the majority of reality TV in two ways. First, A&E challenges the belief that the genre is inherently exploitative. *Beyond Scared Straight*—a chronicle of “at-risk” teenagers visiting local correctional facilities at the behest of their parents, social workers, or guidance counselors—is described as a show “about transforming the lives of young people through hope and second-chances” (“Beyond Scared Straight”). Regarding *Intervention*, which attempts to convince drug addicts and alcoholics to enter treatment using deceptive practices, the network asserts, “The series has conducted 211 interventions since

its premiere in March of 2005, 161 individuals are currently sober” (“About Intervention”). By positioning these texts as socially beneficial, A&E, like HBO, attempts to “place itself in another league” and proclaims itself “different from anything else in the entire [reality] TV market” (McCabe and Akass 68–69).

Second, the producers of *Intervention* and *Beyond Scared Straight* reject the idea that they are making television. Robert Sharenow, executive producer of *Intervention*, positions himself as a documentary filmmaker: “I think what is most riveting about both shows is that they are completely real. I think audiences hunger for authenticity and drama. We are not putting a bunch of people in the same house or on an island. Instead, these are real people in their real lives” (Morfoot A1). *Beyond Scared Straight* executive producer Arnold Shapiro, taking a slightly different approach, seems to think of himself as a philanthropist attempting to help the show’s participants and the public at large: “I have seen so many teenagers turn their lives around after experiencing inmate-run prison programs like ‘Scared Straight’ that I am grateful for the opportunity to bring more of these programs and stories of transformation to television” (qtd. in Hibberd). Borrowing from both Sharenow and Shapiro, Dan Partland, a current executive producer of *Intervention* prefers to think of himself as a philanthropic documentary filmmaker. He says, “We do our best to just capture these situations as honestly as we can. We want to be part of the solution. We don’t want a group’s participation in the show to make it harder for them to get help for their loved ones” (qtd. in Albiniak A1). As Murray notes, reading reality TV through the “lens of documentary” is also related to the belief that particular texts are “socially engaged, informative, authentic, and artistic” (69).

For the majority of critics, this lens allows them to mitigate the most problematic elements in these A&E shows (e.g., Stuever T12; McFarland). In a review of *Intervention*, Heather Havrilesky notes the deceptive nature of the show’s premise but asserts that “on the whole” the show serves the greater good: “Whether *Intervention* was born of a pure heart or a crass desire to capitalize on the lowest moments of others hardly matters to me. What matters is that, in this time of excess and overindulgence and the deification of partying celebrities, this show has the potential to scare the hell out of millions of viewers.” In particular, she finds the show to be a valuable learning experience:

The mistakes the addicts make, the mistakes their codependent parents make, the mistakes their conflict-averse friends make, all add up to a big, ugly mess that's as instructive as it is fascinating. Many of us might not enjoy the mess . . . but there's a lot to learn there, mostly about ourselves and our own susceptibility to weakness, self-pity, blame, destructiveness and passivity. (Havrilesky)

Hale similarly references the intellectual value of *Beyond Scared Straight*. Of the show's "cautionary impulse," he writes, "We're getting the message at the same time that we're watching someone else (who's more at risk than we are) getting the message. Lessons are being taught, and faces rubbed in unpleasant reality, in multiple dimensions." In buttressing industry discourse that positions A&E's programming as nonexploitative and socially beneficial, however, these critical responses do not reflect scholarly understandings of the relationship between the genre and judgmental British audiences.

According to David Morley, reality TV is "central to the 'moral economy' of our period, in which particular types of persons, families and lifestyles are presented as worthy of emulation, while others are devalued and classified as pathological or dysfunctional" (490). Yet, as Laura Grindstaff observes, with a "longer history of documentary lifestyle programming within a more class-conscious national context," the "class dimensions of transformation shows" are more obvious in British reality TV ("Jerry Springer" 201). As such, critical assertions regarding the intellectual value of *Intervention* and *Beyond Scared Straight* seem to reflect class-specific orientations to leisure. For example, in her qualitative research exploring the differences between American and French elites, Michele Lamont finds that upper-middle-class American men value "any kind of activity that can be read as a signal of self-actualization" (92). In this context, leisure activities requiring intellectual engagement (like learning a musical instrument or playing chess) and intellectual curiosity (like being a voracious reader or frequenting art galleries) are highly valued as they are understood as an indication of an individual's desire to maximize their own potential. This orientation explains, in part, why upper-middle-class individuals who once considered television a "passive and mediocre" (Lamont 98) use of leisure time now celebrate "culturally legitimated" postnetwork texts using "terms such as 'original,' 'edgy,' 'complex,' and 'sophisticated'" (Newman and Levine 81).

Whether A&E's audiences understand reality TV participants as worthy of emulation, scorn, or empathy as some critics do with regard to these A&E shows (Stuever; Heffernan, "Crystal Meth Head"; Stanley, "Lost Weekends"), the genre's appeal remains class-specific. According to Anthony Giddens, the reorganization of time and space during modernity "act[s] to transform the content and nature of day-to-day social life" and, as a consequence, "lifestyle choice is increasingly important in the constitution of self-identity" (*Modernity* 2, 5). Yet, unlike premodern cultures "where things stayed more or less the same from generation to generation," this late-modern "altered self has to be explored and constructed as part of a reflexive process of connecting personal and social change" (Giddens, *Modernity* 33). Such reflexive exploration, according to Giddens, necessitates continuous "self-interrogation," generates the "practiced art of self-observation" and requires that "the narrative of the self is made explicit" (*Modernity* 74, 76). As Beverley Skeggs, Helen Wood, and Nancy Thumin note, however, "If reflexivity has become a measure of a person's moral worth, what we see in reality TV are many examples of nonreflexivity: responses which exceed restraint (in the screaming matches, which imply the absence of reflexivity, the logic being that nobody would behave so badly in public, on television) or where articulation is stilted" (16). To further develop the understanding of the relationship between reality TV and the reflexive self, Eva Illouz's "emotional capitalism" is particularly useful.

While many scholars note the prominence of therapeutic discourses during late-modernity, Illouz argues that during this period the distinctive capitalistic ethos of the public sphere and the emotional ethos of the private sphere penetrated each other. This interpenetration resulted in a distinctly Freudian therapeutic emotional style that became integrated into corporate sensibilities and, in conjunction with the institutionalization of both psychology and feminism, began to enter the private sphere creating a private emotional ethos based largely on the public corporate ethos. Yet, in this therapeutic culture, "the ideal of health or self-realization defines *a contrario* a wide variety of dysfunctions. In other words, emotionally unhealthy behaviors are deduced from an implicit reference to and comparison with the model and ideal of the 'fully self-realized life'" (Illouz 46). "Normality and self-realization" have become "the goal of the narrative self," but "because that goal is never given a clear posi-

tive content, it in fact produces a wide variety of unself-realized and therefore sick people" (Illouz 48). As such, "narratives of self-realization" require individuals to identify "the complication in the story—what prevents me from being happy, intimate, successful—and make sense of it in reference to an event in one's past" (Illouz 52). As Illouz notes, although such narratives "democratize suffering" (45) and allow even the very privileged to claim the kind of psychic trauma that was once the exclusive domain of the working classes, emerging "hierarchies of emotional well-being" demonstrate that the distribution of normality and self-realization is not random (73). In this context, middle-class-appropriate performances of self—through "the ability to identify [one's] feelings, talk about them, empathize with [an] other's position and find solutions to a problem"—are demonstrations of "emotional competence" and have value as a social currency (69). Borrowing heavily from Pierre Bourdieu, Illouz posits that, as in cultural fields where knowledge leads to the acquisition of capital, emotional fields are structured by emotional intelligence as "a form of habitus that enables the acquisition of a form of cultural capital situated at the seam line between cultural and social capital" (66) including becoming self-aware, managing emotions, motivating oneself, achieving empathy, and managing relationships. Beyond the ways in which such competence is "a form of [cultural] capital which can be converted into social capital or advancement in the work sphere," Illouz argues that such behavior is also "a resource to help ordinary middle-class people reach ordinary happiness in the private sphere" as such skills reduce rather than exacerbate the ever-present conflicts of daily life (69).

In a theoretical sense, differential access to emotional capital helps explain why, for example, the physical resolution of interpersonal conflicts is inappropriate middle-class behavior because, as Shamus Khan observes in his ethnography of a Northeastern prep school, "violence is idiotic, counterproductive to elite success, and, though no one would ever say this, reeks of the lower classes" (133). This also helps explain class-stratified parenting styles. As Annette Lareau finds in a qualitative examination of the relationship between class and family life, middle-class families engage "in extensive reasoning with their children, asking questions, probing assertions, and listening to answers," thereby providing middle-class children "a larger vocabulary," "the tools," and "the broader knowledge" necessary to "cus-

tomiz[e] situations inside and outside the home to maximize [their] own advantage" (133). Whether "famous for having a big butt and a sex tape" (Wieselmann) as in E!'s *Keeping Up With The Kardashians* or acting as fame-seeking Jezebels on a "modern-day minstrel show" (Pozner 179) as in VH1's *Flavor of Love*, in the context of emotional capitalism, the actual class position of reality TV participants is less significant than their ability (or inability) to demonstrate middle-class behavioral norms. As Laura Grindstaff explains, "any talk-show guest or reality TV participant who looks, talks and behaves a certain way can be labeled 'white trash' (or 'trailer trash') whether or not they are poor, white, and/or living in a trailer park" ("From Jerry Springer" 200). Although many reality shows rely on classed hierarchies that equate particular ways of being with moral worth, *Intervention* and *Beyond Scared Straight* force reflexivity on participants and extract emotional competence with the threat of punitive sanctions.

Intervention

Episodes of *Intervention* feature individuals struggling with drug-addiction or alcoholism who believe they are being filmed as part of a documentary, when in fact they are being filmed in anticipation of the intervention being planned by family and friends. During late-modernity, however, socially marginalized lifestyle choices, like frequent alcohol and drug abuse, are problematic precisely because they are understood "as an inability to colonize the future and as such transgress one of the prime concerns with which individuals now reflexively have to cope" (Giddens, *Transformation* 76), and each episode begins with a dramatic montage demonstrating participants' deficient selfhood. After watching Vinnie take several hits of crack cocaine from a glass stem, the audience is informed that he has been an addict for six years and currently smokes six or seven times a day, hears his brother characterize him as "a fucking loser," and watches his mother tearfully describe how he manipulates her into supporting his addiction ("Vinnie").

The recovery process begins with the preintervention, a covert meeting between the participant's family members and regularly featured interventionists who are the show's only cast members. During these meetings, family members are forced to admit that they are part

of the participant's problem. The episode "Robby" provides a typical example. Immediately after describing alcoholism as a sickness, the interventionist addresses Robby's significant other and forcefully states, "You're allowing things to happen that you swore to God would never happen in your lifetime and at the risk of somebody else who you love more than anyone in the world. So you gotta grow up!" At the conclusion of this exchange, the mother of Robby's child tearfully admits that she is nothing more than a "crutch" which, in effect, is an admission that she is in a codependent *relationship*. According to Giddens, such relationships entail an individual being "tied psychologically to a partner whose activities are governed by compulsiveness of some sort" (*Transformation* 89), and thus lacks the autonomy associated with the late-modern self. Not all family members, however, are so easily convinced. In particular, those who resist the call to reflexivity are what Giddens terms "codependent *individuals*" who are "accustomed to finding their identity through the actions or needs of others" (*Transformation* 89, 92). Linda's mother, for example, objects to selling the house in which her daughter currently lives because she believes her daughter is suffering from a rare neurological disorder that justifies her addiction to a painkiller one hundred times stronger than morphine ("Linda"). The interventionist shoots back, "It's all lies. It's all lies to get your attention—that's the part you're not understanding." Linda's mother replies, "I know my daughter—she is sick with constant pain." At this point, other family members begin to shame Linda's mother. A sibling, obviously frustrated, blurts out, "This is a waste of time. We all should just go home right now." Linda's father gives his wife an ultimatum, "You have two choices. Go for treatment or remain status quo." The preintervention ends when the interventionist tells Linda's mother that her codependency is "holding her family hostage."

Episodes, however, only reach their climax when unsuspecting participants show up for what they believe will be their final interview and are instead confronted by their families and friends. If the purpose of the preintervention is to convince a participant's family members that everyone involved is "in need of modification," then during the intervention itself family members display emotional competence by "promis[ing] to transform, to improve and become proper" (Skeggs, Wood, and Thumin 16). This is typically achieved when letters written by family members are read aloud to the participant.

Although each begins with the recognition that the participant is unwell, the function of the public reading is to allow family members and friends to perform respectability by condemning past behavior of participants. For example, a friend writes, "I felt empty, numb, and betrayed when you showed up at my grad[uation] party plastered, making out with three different guys and finally winding up naked having sex with one of them in front of the entrance where people walked in and out of the party" ("Jennifer"). Furthermore, in these letters, family members threaten participants with a variety of sanctions including social isolation ("Robby") and homelessness ("Vinnie"). In relation to the reflexive project of self, outlining these sanctions is particularly important as "defining personal boundaries . . . directly concerns the self and reflexivity" (Giddens, *Transformation* 93).

Nevertheless, both the letters and the sanctions are part of the larger attempt to convince participants to accept ninety days of all-expenses-paid treatment at a rehabilitation facility. Once the participant acquiesces, the tone of the intervention immediately shifts. In many episodes, interventionists explicitly encourage friends and family members to hug the participant in celebration. And, as a text, *Intervention* is largely successful in creating such moments. In season eight, only one participant refused to enter treatment ("Marquel"). It is, however, only during the follow-up segment of each episode that participants, rather than family members, invoke narratives of self-realization. After ten weeks in treatment for alcoholism, Kristine asserts, "I have been sober for seventy-four days and I feel amazing. I'm just healthier. I go for walks everyday. I'm really enjoying my life now" ("Kristine"). Of the medical conditions that drove her to drink, she says, "I'm not going to freak out about it though. What's scarier to me is that alcohol almost killed me." The follow-up ends with Kristine claiming to be a fully realized, reformed self: "My life feels exciting to me right now and it hasn't felt that way in so long." Yet, just as the definitive moral conclusions of network era television support the hegemonic belief that large-scale social problems are "susceptible to successful individual resolutions" (Gitlin 260); here, successful outcomes largely obscure the relationship between social class and emotional competence.

Intervention is not always successful in its reformative efforts. Episodes end by informing the audience about a participant's progress.

During one conclusion, two black screens state, “Vinnie left treatment after 29 days. His mother flew him home. Vinnie’s mother attended the Betty Ford Center Family Program” and “Vinnie was working at his father’s auto shop but quit after they had an argument. Vinnie has had several relapses since leaving treatment but says he has been sober since March 12, 2010” (“Vinnie”). Yet, by displaying such failures, the text reasserts its connection with documentary, as, for many, overcoming self-destructive behavior is a lifelong struggle rather than an obstacle surpassed.

Beyond Scared Straight

If “reflexively organized life-planning. . . normally presumes consideration of risks as filtered through contact with expert knowledge” (Giddens, *Modernity* 5), then *Beyond Scared Straight* starts with *Intervention*-esque montages demonstrating that participants are neither reflexive nor capable of such consideration. Jerry, for example, a sixteen-year-old Latino male with a shock of bright green hair and a history of drug possession, carrying weapons, and fighting, confidently claims, “I’m in a crew. All we do is fight. They call me ‘Bam Bam.’ Two hits and they’re done” (“San Bernadino County, CA”). This confession is followed by videos of Jerry flashing a box-cutter and arguing with his parents. The montage concludes with a plea from his mother, “I want the fear of God put into him by these men. I want them to please, *please* help us.” After presenting five or six confessions, the jail visit begins with prison staff members verbally abusing the underage participants. In the second season premiere (“Mecklenberg, NC”), a female staff member, whose stance and dress resemble a military drill instructor, shouts commands at the participants: “You need to pay attention to what is going on! Not paying attention can get you seriously hurt! And I will not take pity on you if you get hurt because you weren’t listening to what I told you to do.” In other episodes, prison staff berate participants as they do calisthenics to the point of exhaustion (“Richland County, SC”).

Next, the teens tour the facility where they are often verbally terrorized and physically intimidated by inmates. In Portsmouth, VA, several inmates gathered in the common area of a tier to inform Angela, a blonde-haired, blue-eyed fourteen-year-old with a history

of fighting and school suspensions, “When you come in here, you’re soft. You’re going to be somebody’s bitch” (“City of Portsmouth, VA”). After Angela reacts negatively to being called a bitch, an inmate asks, “You want to be gang raped? Because that’s what’s going to happen to your ass when you come in here.” Images of the participants walking through exercise yards are commonly punctuated by shouts like “You gonna be my bitch!” (“Chowchilla”). In addition to such threats, inmates frequently reference the poor quality of living conditions, the lack of physical freedom, or the problems associated with having a felony on one’s criminal record. Jail visits also include more intimate interactions between participants and inmates. Frequently, inmates introduce themselves by stating their crime, their sentence, and explaining the personal cost of long-term incarceration. At Western Tidewater Regional Jail, teens sit on one side of a long narrow table as Clifton, a thirty-nine-year-old serving a sentence for marijuana distribution, takes turns screaming in each participant’s face. He challenges one to fight, stating, “I want you to raise up! I would knock your fucking head off” (“Western Tidewater”). Further down the table, he tells another that she needs to be put “around some real women who will whip her fucking ass.” After these introductions, however, the intimidating atmosphere largely dissipates when participants and inmates pair up for one-on-one meetings. Inmates typically begin by connecting with the participants by saying “I used to be just like you” and explaining the ways in which “being stupid” or “slick” ruined their lives (“Jessup”). Like the preintervention, the purpose of these one-on-one interactions is to extract reflexive displays. After several failed attempts to claim she does not know why she has a history of fighting older, bigger men (in addition to fighting women of her own age), Jeiza tearfully admits that she “watched my mom get hit on by one of them” to several inmates (“Jessup”). In such scenes, *Beyond Scared Straight* coerces participants into narratives of self-realization by demanding they explain their behavior in terms of a past trauma.

In the context of each episode, the combination of forced reflexivity and the residual terror from the tour ensures displays of emotional competence when the teens are reunited with their parents. Images of seventeen-year-old Taylor (theft, drugs, alcohol) crying as she apologizes precede a description of the value of the experience (“Hampton Roads, VA”). She says, “I mean, I am a tough person and I can stand

up for myself. But there are people that scared me in there. I'd probably be getting my ass kicked every day and being somebody's bitch . . . I have learned that I don't want to end up here." Similarly, Julian, a sixteen-year-old with a history of drugs and fighting, begins an emotional letter to his mother by saying, "I know I'm not the person you want me to be. But I know I can change" ("Western Tidewater"). He later tells the camera, "I am a good person, I just didn't want to show it for a while." Like Taylor and Julian, the overwhelming majority of participants demonstrate significantly more self-awareness during these emotional scenes than in their confessions at the beginning of the show.

Yet, in each episode's last segment, follow-ups one month later reveal if these performances are, in fact, a reflection of moral worth. When the transformation is successful, the audience hears testimonials from both the participants and their parents about the benefit of the program. Tracy, mother of fourteen-year-old Tia, tells the camera, "I'm glad she's away from [old friends] and I think she's happier now too. You know, there's not so much drama" ("Oakland County, MI"). Tia adds, "Since the jail visit, it was kind of like a process for me to stop smoking weed. I did it a couple of times after the jail tour but then I started asking myself, 'Why am I doing this?'" In describing his visit, Kareem, a thirteen-year-old who has been caught shoplifting and in possession of marijuana, similarly asserts, "Since visiting the jail, I changed my behavior because life in jail isn't really worth it" ("Oakland County, MI"). His transformation is confirmed by a deputy who reports, "I've heard through Kareem's grandmother that his behavior has improved drastically."

Although these testimonials indicate an increased ability to manage one's emotions and social relationships, not all participants are reformed; in several episodes, failure to display middle-class appropriate behavior is met with punitive sanctions from the state. Kenya, mother of fourteen-year-old Keandra, who has a history of arson and fighting, tells the camera that her child's behavior improved until she assaulted her brother ("Western Tidewater"). Once the police were called, Keandra fled the scene and did not return home. According to her mother, when appearing for a court date, Keandra "spazzed out on the judge. And the judge was like, 'That's it. I'm locking you up.' Keandra been locked up in detention for about a week, and I haven't seen or talked to her since. I love her to death, and I miss her being

here. But she needs to learn some type of lesson.” Similarly, when the jail visit failed to change twelve-year-old Jemel’s behavior, his mother Sherrie asked for further assistance (“City of Portsmouth, VA”). As a consequence, two sheriff’s deputies pick him up at school where he is handcuffed and transported back to the jail facility for an additional day of verbal abuse and manual labor.

While both *Intervention* and *Beyond Scared Straight* mark themselves as superior to reality TV as a genre and ensure middle-class performances from participants through deception and terror, respectively, a significant difference is the latter’s tendency to present nonnormative families as deficient. For example, only seven of the show’s eighty-three participants are white and live with their married biological parents. Twice as many participants are African American and live with a single mother. Furthermore, only one of the white participants failed to be transformed by the process (“Lieber”). As such, *Beyond Scared Straight* closely resembles exploitative talk shows like *The Jerry Springer Show* and *Maury* by providing audiences with a “stereotypical facsimile of lower class life” (Grindstaff, *The Money Shot*, 251). *Intervention*, in contrast, is largely concerned with explaining the failure of participants who were once members of the middle class like small business owners (“Greg”), professional actors (“Linda”), and radiation therapists (“Jackie”). Nonetheless, like much of the genre, the reality of both *Intervention* and *Beyond Scared Straight* is structured and orchestrated to highlight individual shortcomings rather than broader structural barriers.

Conclusion

Perhaps the elevated status of *Intervention* and *Beyond Scared Straight* is not that surprising. Just as prime-time serials on HBO became culturally legitimated by “taking control of the illicit” and wrapping it in an “institutional discourse of quality” (McCabe and Akass 69), the analysis of industry and critical discourse indicates that the status of these A&E shows is dependent upon their ability to become an appropriate form of upper-middle-class leisure by distancing themselves from the most devalued characteristics of the genre. In using a motif similar to “showrunner as *auteur*” (Newman and Levine 38), these discourses successfully transform the reality TV showrunner from low-

culture hack into serious filmmaker and philanthropist. In addition, the presentation of both success and failure brings to mind Anmol Chaddha and William Julius Wilson's observation about a culturally legitimated prime-time serial, "*The Wire* is fiction, but it forces us to confront social realities more effectively than any other media production in the era of so-called reality TV. It does not tie things up neatly; as in real life, the problems remain unsolved, and the cycle repeats itself as disadvantages become more deeply entrenched." Despite these similarities, neither *Intervention* nor *Beyond Scared Straight* are fictional productions that generate meaningful social critiques.

Regardless of whatever benefit is provided audiences by way of bringing self-destructive behavior into public consciousness, arguments asserting these texts do more good than harm are fundamentally reductive. While A&E claims *Intervention* has helped hundreds of participants and their families, no mention is made of the families further damaged when, for example, a loved one commits suicide after being featured on the show (Monahan). Of the youthful offender diversion programs (as they are officially known) featured in *Beyond Scared Straight*, research indicates that participating "on average is more harmful to juveniles than doing nothing" (Petrosino, Turpin-Petrosino, and Buehler 41). In this light, much as the artistic integrity associated with HBO prime-time dramas supports the network's image as a producer of art for its own sake, A&E's attempt to frame reality TV as philanthropic documentary obscures the medium's commercial motivations and renders any negative consequences irrelevant.

As such, the elevated status of *Intervention* and *Beyond Scared Straight* is based on the traditional classed-hierarchy that equates emotional competence and reflexivity with moral worth, except that rather than appeal to middle-class audiences with images of participants struggling to behave in accordance with bourgeois taste, *Intervention* and *Beyond Scared Straight* use the misery of the socially marginal to transform reality TV from guilty pleasure into a valuable experience for upper-middle-class taste-makers like professional television critics. Furthermore, as the awards and critical acclaim continue to mount, the acceptance or rejection of these legitimated reality TV texts become increasingly related to cultural capital. *Chicago Sun Times* reviewer Doug Elfman writes, "It would be understandable if a viewer thought of *Intervention* as exploitation. But this

is not a glitzy reality show with writers. It is a gritty documentary series." Although the imaginary "viewer" remains unspecified, this statement seems to indicate that those who consider such texts to be exploitative lack the cultural capital needed to appreciate them.

Nevertheless, it is only by recognizing the relationship between the hegemonic ideologies of late-modernity and the appeal of these A&E texts that the socially constructed nature of reality TV's increasing cultural legitimacy ceases being taken-for-granted. Yet, this research is hardly exhaustive. While the above analysis focuses exclusively on A&E, there are other cable networks competing for the same blue-chip demographics and industry accolades. To further explore reality TV's increasing cultural legitimacy in the postnetwork era, future research might consider the mechanisms by which Discovery Channel's 2011 Emmy-winning series *Deadliest Catch* and the three-time Emmy-nominated *Dirty Jobs* turn the occupational lives of working-class men into intellectually demanding viewing experiences.

Works Cited

- A&E Networks. "About." Web. 23 Feb. 2013.
- A&E Networks. "About Intervention—Aetv.com." Web. 23 Feb. 2013.
- A&E Networks. "Beyond Scared Straight—About the Show." Web. 23 Feb. 2013.
- Advertising Age*. "Cable Guide 2012: A&E." Web.
- Albiniak, Paige. "High Stakes Don't Szymie 'Intervention'." *Variety* 30 Nov. 2010: A1. Print.
- Baumann, Shyon. *Hollywood Highbrow: From Entertainment to Art*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2007. Print.
- Beyond Scared Straight*. A&E Networks. 2011–.Television.
- Beyond Scared Straight*. "Oakland County, MI—Girls" A&E, 12 Jan. 2012. Television.
- Beyond Scared Straight*. "Richland County, SC." A&E, 8 Dec. 2011. Television.
- Beyond Scared Straight*. "San Bernadino County, CA." A&E, 15 Sept. 2011. Television.
- Beyond Scared Straight*. "Western Tidewater Regional Jail." A&E, 29 Dec. 2011. Television.

- Bourdieu, Pierre. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*. Trans. Richard Nice. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1984. Print.
- Chaddha, Anmol, and William Julius Wilson. "Why We're Teaching 'The Wire' at Harvard." *Washington Post* 12 Sept. 2010: B2. Print.
- David, Jim. "Bristol Palin: Life's A Tripp"—The Worst Reality TV Ever." *Huffington Post* 25 Jun. 2012. Web. 23 Feb. 2013.
- Elfman, Doug. "Grit Puts 'Intervention' Ahead of Reality Shows." *Chicago Sun Times* 28 Oct. 2005. Web. 23 Feb. 2013.
- Friedman, Marcelle. "House Hunters Is Fake: Here's Why You Should Care." *Slate.com* 14 Jun. 2012. Web. 29 Nov. 2012.
- Gans, Herbert. *Popular Culture and High Culture: An Analysis and Evaluation Of Taste Revised And Updated*. 2nd ed. New York: Basic Books, 1999. Print.
- Giddens, Anthony. *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*. 1st ed. Palo Alto: Stanford UP, 1991. Print.
- . *The Transformation of Intimacy: Sexuality, Love, and Eroticism in Modern Societies*. 1st ed. Palo Alto, CA: Stanford UP, 1993. Print.
- Gitlin, Todd. "Television's Screens: Hegemony in Transition." *American Media and Mass Culture: Left Perspectives*. Ed. Donald Lazere. Los Angeles: U of California P, 1987. 202–46. Print.
- Grindstaff, Laura. "From Jerry Springer to Jersey Shore: The Cultural Politics of Class In/on US Reality Programming." *Reality Television and Class*. Ed. Beverley Skeggs and Helen Wood. London: British Film Institute, 2011. 197–209. Print.
- . *The Money Shot: Trash, Class, and the Making of TV Talk Shows*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2002. Web. 23 Feb. 2013.
- Hale, Mike. "A&E's Prime-Time Lineup Wallows in Depravity." *New York Times* 19 Jan. 2011. Web. 23 Feb. 2013.
- Havrilesky, Heather. "TV on Crack." *Salon.com* 22 Mar. 2005. Web. 23 Feb. 2013.
- Heffernan, Virginia. "Confronting a Crystal Meth Head Who Is Handy With a Chainsaw." *New York Times* 10 Aug. 2007: E18. Print.
- . "Revamping Reality." *Opinionator (nytimes.com)* 28 Aug. 2011. Web. 23 Feb. 2013.
- Hibberd, James. "A&E Orders Sequel to Docu-classic 'Scared Straight'." *Hollywood Reporter* 30 Nov. 2010. Web. 23 Feb. 2013.
- Hicks, Marybeth. "Then Again . . .: MTV's Assault Alive in Jersey." *Washington Times* 13 Jan. 2010: B5. Print.
- Illouz, Eva. *Cold Intimacies: The Making of Emotional Capitalism*. 1st ed. Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2007. Print.

- Intervention*. A&E Networks. 2005—present. Television. “Greg.” A&E, 7 Dec. 2009. Television.
- Intervention*. “Jackie.” A&E, 11 Jan. 2010. Television.
- Intervention*. “Jennifer.” A&E, 14 Dec. 2009. Television.
- Intervention*. “Kristine.” A&E, 15 Feb. 2010. Television.
- Intervention*. “Linda.” A&E, 2009. Television.
- Intervention*. “Marquel.” A&E, 8 Feb. 2010. Television.
- Intervention*. “Robby.” A&E, 25 Jan. 2010. Television.
- Intervention*. “Vinnie.” A&E, 3 May 2010. Television.
- Khan, Shamus Rahman. *Privilege: The Making of an Adolescent Elite at St. Paul’s School*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2012. Print.
- Lamont, Michele. *Money, Morals, and Manners: The Culture of the French and the American Upper-Middle Class*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1992. Print.
- Lareau, Annette. *Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race, and Family Life*. 1st ed. Berkeley: U of California P, 2003. Print.
- McCabe, Janet, and Kim Akass. “Sex, Swearing and Respectability: Courting Controversy, HBO’s Original Programming and Producing Quality TV.” *Quality TV: Contemporary American Television and Beyond*. Eds. Janet McCabe and Kim Akass. London: I.B. Tauris, 2007. 62–76. Print.
- McFarland, Melanie. “On TV: ‘Addiction’ Takes Pains to Show Us Real Drug Abuse.” *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* 12 Mar. 2007. Web. 23 Feb. 2013.
- Mihalsky, Tim. “Reality TV: It’s Time to Get Real.” *Huffington Post* 14 July 2010. Web. 23 Feb. 2013.
- Monahan, Lisa. “Standoff In Alex Ends With Suicide, Victim Appeared On A&E’s Intervention.” <http://www.news9.com> 10 Nov. 2011. Web. 23 Feb. 2013.
- Morfoot, Addie. “Destructive Behaviors Make Compulsive Viewing.” *Daily Variety* 7 Jun. 2010: A1. Print.
- Morley, David. “Mediated Class-ifications Representations of Class and Culture in Contemporary British Television.” *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 12.4 (2009): 487–508.
- Murray, Susan. “I Think We Need a New Name for It: The Meeting of Documentary and Reality Television.” *Reality TV: Remaking Television Culture*. Ed. Susan Murray and Laurie Ouellette. New York: New York UP, 2009. 40–56. Print.
- Murray, Susan and Laurie Ouellette, eds. *Reality TV: Remaking Television Culture*. New York: New York UP, 2008. Print.
- Newman, Michael Z., and Elana Levine. *Legitimizing Television: Media Convergence and Cultural Status*. New York: Routledge, 2011. Print.

- Petrosino, Anthony, Carolyn Turpin-Petrosino, and John Buehler. "Scared Straight and Other Juvenile Awareness Programs for Preventing Juvenile Delinquency: A Systematic Review of the Randomized Experimental Evidence." *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 589.1 (2003): 41–62. Print.
- Pozner, Jennifer L. *Reality Bites Back: The Troubling Truth About Guilty Pleasure TV*. Berkeley, CA: Seal Press, 2010. Print.
- Rorke, Robert. "The Don't Miss List." *New York Post* 21 Aug. 2005. Web. 23 Feb. 2013.
- Sanneh, Kelefa. "The Reality Principle: The Rise and Rise of a Television Genre." *The New Yorker* 9 May 2011: 72. Print.
- Skeggs, Beverley, Nancy Thumim, and Helen Wood. "'Oh Goodness, I Am Watching Reality TV' How Methods Make Class in Audience Research." *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 11.1 (2008): 5–24. Print.
- Skeggs, Beverley, Helen Wood, and Nancy Thumin. "Making Class Through Moral Extension on Reality TV." 2007. Web. 23 Feb. 2013.
- Stanley, Alessandra. "The Classless Utopia of Reality TV." *New York Times* 2 Dec. 2007: Arts/Television 1. Print.
- . "When Lost Weekends Become Lost Lives." *New York Times* 18 Apr. 2005: E1. Print.
- Stuever, Hank. "'Intervention's' Hard to Watch and Harder Not To." *Washington Post* 1 Jan. 2012: T12. Print.
- Wieselman, Jarett. "Kim Kardashian Passes the Butt." *PopWrap* (ny-post.com) 13 Nov. 2009. Web. 23 Feb. 2013.
- Wiltz, Teresa. "On Reality TV, Who's Minding the Kids?; More Shows Raise Issue of Exploitation." *Washington Post* 26 July 2008: A1. Print.

Michael L. Wayne is a postdoctoral scholar at the LINKS Research Center in the Department of Communication Studies at Ben-Gurion University of the Negev. His research addresses the relationships between television audiences and televisual texts in the postnetwork era. His work has been published in *Global Media Journal*, *Interactions: Studies in Communication & Culture*, and the *Journal of Popular Television*.