Reality Blurred? The ethical challenges and responsibilities presented by Reality Television
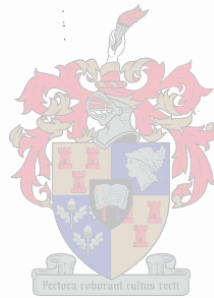
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Assignment presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Philosophy (Journalism) at the University of Stellenbosch.

H. Wasserman

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I

Declaration

I, the undersigned, hereby declare that the work contained in this assignment is my own original work and that I have not previously in its entirety or in part submitted it at any university for a degree.

Signature: Date: 07.02.2002

II

Summary

Reality television combines various genres of entertainment to produce material that has in recent years gripped the attention of audiences across the globe. It is presented in various formats such as game or talk shows, which each reveal different ethical dilemmas to media practitioners. Reality shows place ordinary persons in exotic locations or situations where cameras capture non-scripted scenes that reveal the joy and heartache of participants. These programmes often lay the lives of normal people bare to all and, thus, the question arises as to whether it is ethical for the media to subject participants to the scrutiny of the audience in this way.

Reality television has highlighted the ethical challenges and responsibilities presented to media practitioners in the modern media industry where competition may adversely affect ethical choices. In this assignment the function of journalists and their ethical position is touched on, while the medium of television, its entertainment value and the effect of commercialism on the media industry is examined. Various international and South African reality television productions are considered in an attempt to discover how current media practitioners deal with ethical challenges, and weigh up financial gain against upholding the moral values of society. The role of media practitioners as moral agents and the effect that the material they disseminate may have on their audience is furthermore discussed by using case studies.

The future of reality television, particularly after the terror attacks of 11 September 2001 in the USA, is speculated and it is determined that it appears that reality-based programming will be a feature of television in the short term. Media practitioners need to realize their place in society and make ethical decisions that encourage artistic values and uplift society. Reality television presents a number of challenges in this regard and has the potential to continue to raise ethical issues in the future.

Opsomming

Realiteitstelevisie is 'n kombinasie van verskeie vermaaklikheidsgenres en het oor die afgelope jare die aandag van kykers wêreldwyd aangegryp. Dit word op verskeie wyses aangebied soos byvoorbeeld in die vorm van speletjies- of geselsprogramme, welke elk verskillende etiese dilemmas vir media praktisyns daarstel. Hierdie programme plaas gewone persone voor die kameras op eksotiese bestemmings en in unieke situasies waar die ware blydskap en hartseer van deelnemers vasgelê word op film. Hierdie programme beskou soms elke aspek van deelnemers se lewens, en dus word die vraag geopper of dit eties is vir die media om die lewens van deelnemers bloot te lê vir kritiek van kykers.

Realiteitstelevisie het die etiese uitdagings en veranwoordelikhede van media praktisyns in die moderne media bedryf, waar kompetisie 'n negatiewe effek op etiese keuses mag hê, na vore gebring. In hierdie werkstuk word die funksie van joernaliste en hul ethiese posisie kortliks aangeraak, terwyl die middel van televisie, die vermaaklikheidswaarde daarvan asook die effek van kommersialisme op die media bedryf ondersoek. Verskeie internasionale en Suid-Afrikaanse realteitstelevisie produksies word hierin oorweeg in 'n poging om te ontdek hoe huidige media praktisyns etiese uitdagings hanteer en finansiële gewin opweeg teenoor die morele waardes van die gemeenskap. Die rol van media praktisyns as morele agente en die effek van die materiaal wat hulle versprei word ook bepsreek deur middel van gevallestudies.

Die toekoms van realiteitstelevisie, veral na die terreur aanvalle van 11 September 2001 in die VSA, word gespekuleer en word dit bevind dat realiteitstelevisie, minstens in die kort termyn, 'n eienskap van televisie in die toekoms sal wees. Media praktisyns moet hul plek in die samelewing besef en etiese besluit neem wat die artistieke waardes van die gemeenskap bevorder. Realiteitstelevisie opper vele uitdagings in hierdie opsig en beloof om ook in die toekoms etiese aspekte uit te lig.

2

Index   Page

3

Reality Blurred? The ethical challenges and responsibilities presented by Reality Television

1. Introduction

Reality television involves ordinary people doing extraordinary things. This may entail camping in the Australian Outback, sailing on a love cruise or being locked up in a house with strangers for weeks. The phenomenon of reality television caught the imagination of viewers and the attention of critics globally. This revolution has been described as cruel, voyeuristic and humiliating by many, yet it seems to keep audiences glued to their television sets. The popularity of this form of programming has highlighted one of the ethical dilemmas in which the media industry finds itself. This industry has become a commercial enterprise like any other, yet the obligation of media practitioners to serve society remains, which presents various ethical conflicts.

The aim of this paper is to highlight the daily ethical choices that media practitioners are faced with as well as the deliberation of morality issues that reality television requires. It focuses on what is relevant to South Africa and, as a great deal of this country's programming is received from the United States, many references have been made to work produced in America in an attempt to further the understanding of the concepts relevant to reality television here. The function of journalists and their ethical position is briefly examined, after which aspects of television in general, with special focus on reality television, are discussed. The focus throughout is on the ethical decision-making and moral behaviour of media practitioners working in reality television. In this way the ethical responsibilities of media practitioners are investigated. In addition, issues such as the lengths that broadcasters are willing to go to in the hope of higher ratings and financial benefit are examined in order to promote understanding as to the challenges reality television presents to the modern media industry.

2. Function of journalists

The guiding principles for journalists are to seek the truth and report it as fully as possible, to act independently and to minimise harm when reporting (Black 1995:17). In 1947 the American Hutchins Commission on Freedom of the Press found the essential function of the press to be to provide a "truthful, comprehensive, and intelligent account of the day's events in a context that gives them meaning" (Day 1991:35). This indeed broadly describes the journalistic purpose of media practitioners and embodies the ideas that the media should at all times consider. In striving for these principles, media practitioners will encounter many divergent views on what the correct way is to achieve these aims and, in addition, what precisely constitutes these principles. When determining this for themselves, journalists have to make various ethical decisions that influence the outcome of the story. These principles are, in addition, relevant for the entire media industry, even those practitioners who create only entertainment. Such members of the media industry may rather be described as media practitioners. They do not perform the same tasks as journalists who inform and educate their audience. Media practitioners often simply entertain and provide viewers with material that allows them to forget the problems that face the world. Media practitioners are not only important transmitters of a society's cultural heritage, but also reflect the ethical standards of a community, and thus have a duty to report accurately and responsibly.

Media practitioners have a special responsibility to the community of which they form part, as they largely reflect the ethical climate of their community. Unlike many other professions where the role of practitioners thereof is institutionally defined, this is not the case with journalism. Media practitioners have to determine for themselves what exactly their role in society is as well as the ethical standards that they wish to uphold and be able to justify those principles to the public (Black 1995:29). Journalists play a very significant role in the democratic process, even more so in a pluralistic social structure. Entertainment media practitioners do not have the same function as news journalists in being a watchdog for society, however it remains

5

significant that the media industry as a whole undertake moral reasoning when deciding which information should be disseminated and be able to motivate their determination.

3. Ethical considerations for the media

Ethics is the branch of philosophy that deals with questions of human moral behaviour. Ethics are often viewed as a set of principles or code of moral conduct and involves the evaluation and application of the moral values that a society or culture has accepted as its norms (Day 1991:5). When attempting to make difficult moral decisions, ethical reasoning may assist practitioners in making a determination, as it provides the tools with which such decisions may be made. Ethics in journalism is not simply about reflecting whether something is right or wrong, but rather about concluding various acceptable answers and choosing from them (Black 1995:39).

A system of ethics is a cornerstone of any civilisation. It is necessary to create a society of trust, understanding and co-operation among individuals who are a part thereof. Furthermore, it is a moral gatekeeper for the community as it warns the individuals of the relative importance of certain moral values (Day 1991:42). In today's society many issues arise which require an ethical response from individuals. Therefore, a system of ethics is necessary to assist persons in determining what is right and wrong in society, as the ethical values of individuals may be in conflict with those of the community. Individuals cannot set their own standards of ethical conduct because a norm for moral behaviour needs to be present in society in order to ensure that morals do not entirely disappear. Ethical decisions are made by individuals within a specific context and based on the specific experiences of that person as well as the political, social and cultural climate that applies to them (Day 1991:42). These factors affect the ethical decisions that individuals make, but will not necessarily dictate them.

6

Moral agents are the persons who are in a position where they have to make ethical judgements. Indeed media practitioners are viewed as moral agents as they are viewed as protectors of society. It is important that these agents accept responsibility for their ethical determinations. Thus, where an individual is ordered to act immorally, whether that person decides to follow the order or contravene it is still an ethical decision for that specific individual to make. Morality involves taking into account the interests of others when making ethical determinations. This means that someone who acts only in their own interest cannot by definition make ethical determinations (Day 1991:9). This may not entirely be the case as there is the view that self-interest should always be the primary determinant in choosing which course of action to follow. Supporters of this belief are known as egoists and do not necessarily advocate that the impact of one's behaviour on others be ignored, but that their own interests are always paramount. Though altruism may at times be found in egoists, their ultimate goal is self-interest. Day comments that the public often view media practitioners as egoists which has, in turn, led to a crisis of confidence in this industry (Day 1991:9). This appears to be the case as there is a public perception that media practitioners will go to any lengths in order to get a story, as the success of the story is in their own interest.

Attitudes concerning the media are increasingly negative. Many viewers refer to sleaze television and tabloid journalism which indicates their perception of the industry (Day 1991:15). This may be a generalisation, but it is the general belief of the public that reality television does not assist in warding off this stigma (Frostrup 2001). In our modern society, many experiences are had by individuals in a vicarious manner through television and where this is the case perception becomes reality. Thus, for example, television viewers feel that they have had a certain experience if they have seen a television programme. Thus, even though they have never travelled to the specific place or spoken to the particular person, they feel that they somehow have knowledge of that place or person.

7

Day (1991:15) comments that it is a paradox of our libertarian civilization that the sense of co-operation and obligation instilled in us from early childhood is constantly being challenged by a society that values individualism and competition. Competition is an undeniable instinct of man, however our ethical values dictate that where competition, purely in our own interest, is likely to cause harm to others, we should not partake in it (Day 1991:15). Media practitioners are moral agents of the values of our society and part of their obligation is to reflect the standards of society. Therefore, as moral agents media practitioners are expected to be ethical persons who somehow have to find a morally acceptable solution to the problem of competition. They may often be in a position where self-interest and gain is in conflict with the interests of others. An ethical person will keep these competing forces in balance and not allow pure self-interest to dominate over the concern for others. Media practitioners should therefore not simply see their own goal, but consider how their actions may impact on individuals and society as a whole. This may present a difficult dilemma to media practitioners, however it is paramount that they be able to justify their conclusion.

An individual's ethical decisions may be affected directly by four influential sources that aid in the formation of values and attitudes of that person, Day states. These sources include family, peer groups, role models and societal institutions (Day 1991:11). The extent to which each of these is responsible for the moral behaviour of an individual depends on the unique circumstances of each individual. Media practitioners are moral agents but also role models to individuals, and as such have a moral obligation toward their followers. Role models are individuals that the public admire, respect and wish to mimic. This means that viewers can be influenced in either a negative or positive manner by persons they consider to be role models. Children and adolescents, for example, often strive to be exactly like their role model as they become psychologically involved with these people. They wish to be like their role model and one may find that they try to emulate their appearance or ideas. Therefore, such role models may have an effect on the ethical values of their followers, and need to be aware of this. Media practitioners not only have to reflect on themselves as role models, but should in addition be weary of the power they have

8

to create role models. How persons are portrayed by the media may affect their role model status and practitioners need to bear this in mind.

Another factor that is of significance for the media in determining ethical behaviour is societal institutions (Day 1991:12). It is not always certain whether media practitioners simply reflect societal institutions or whether the ethical standards of the industry is altered by them. This is a complex question and the answer may at various times lie in either of the choices. Society's institutions do reflect the prevailing norms of the community, but may indeed at the same time be instrumental in effecting changes in attitudes concerning standards of conduct of individuals. In addition though, the media may have a role to play in uplifting the ethical values created by societal institutions at times. Thus, media practitioners may have a duty to entertain their audience in such a manner that they attempt to uplift the taste of viewers rather than simply reflecting the norms of society.

Media practitioners should not make ethical decisions that everyone in society agrees with. This is in any case almost impossible as where ethical issues come into play, divergent views are always found as individuals have different experiences and outlooks. Instead, media practitioners should attempt moral reasoning, taking into account various ethical issues and choices, and arrive at a determination that they can defend on a rational basis. Where the ethics of the matter has been considered, media practitioners will deliver a greater service to their community as they will have attempted to view the story or programme from all possible angles.

4. The medium of television

The public message conveyed by television is surrounded by phrases such as "seeing is believing", "a picture is worth a thousand words" and "the camera never lies". These words and ideas invest television with qualities for delivering truth and understanding to those who watch it and therefore media practitioners have a special role to play in society to deliver this (Cabral).

9

Television appears to be omnipresent in modern society. It has become an integral part of most lives and has exerted its influence in various spheres. Due to the vicarious experiences the audience has through the medium, it plays a role in the formation of, amongst others, attitudes, opinions, values and buying habits of the viewer. Television also performs the role of a companion to many individuals and often, even when no one is watching television, the set may be switched on for this purpose (Troppe). Television is somehow a common denominator that has in a way succeeded in breaking economic, racial, cultural and religious lines and reaches world wide audiences. It is a medium that has immediacy as well as the ability to communicate a process to the viewer and bring them a story from start to finish.

For many people television is their primary source of entertainment (Allen 1992:3). Viewers often turn on the television in the hope of finding amusement. Much of the programming on television is aimed at providing the audience with relaxation, escape, enjoyment, pleasure or diversion. The various forms of programming found on television include sitcoms, soap operas, dramas, music, movies, news, education, sport, quiz/game shows and reality-based programming. Many of the entertainment programmes are not taken seriously by critics or viewers as their content is such that many believe that it is of no consequence to the viewer. Most reality-based programmes probably fall into this category, where the sole object is to entertain the viewer. When it is considered that the majority of people spend a large portion of their waking hours in front of the television set, the material viewed, no matter of what nature, must in a way influence them. Therefore, it is also necessary to determine what responsibilities media practitioners have to their viewers when bringing entertainment into their homes.

Mass communication consists of messages that are transmitted to large audiences via broadcast and print media. Television is a form of this communication. According to Cabral, the quality of communication exchanged through mass media is very significant as the messages sent have either a positive or negative effect on receivers hereof. In regular programming, such as news, there are gatekeepers in the form of

10

producers and editors, who carefully prepare the messages that are sent to the audience. These gatekeepers are very cautious of the messages their reports send and should at all times be aware of the implications that such messages may have. The gatekeepers ultimately determine what the public views and hears, but more importantly also determine what information does not reach the public (Cabral). In the same way, gatekeepers exist in reality television as producers cut and paste content to bring viewers the most exciting pieces.

Some argue that the media's ethical bankruptcy exists not only in isolated instances but engulfs the entire industry and gatekeepers directly affect this perception (Cabral). The poor image of ethics in the media is also affected by reality-based shows where producers are often faced with ethical choices. As there is no script to guide participants they may frequently say or do as they please. How producers deal with this material and whether it should be screened to the viewing public are matters that they have to decide. In reality television one finds that gatekeepers have the ability to take small pieces from hours of filming and project participants in a certain way. They also have the power to decide how much focus is given to various issues or persons, in such a way manipulating the audience as to what the important issues are. In reality shows where the focus is placed affects what the public believes to be occurring in the specific situation. In this way gatekeepers not only decide what information is relevant or irrelevant to the viewer, but also set the agenda for the viewer. How the audience perceives the information produced does depend on their own experiences and background as well as the event or person screened, but gatekeepers still control the information disseminated.

Television is about bringing pictures and sound into the homes of viewers. Although it is a direct medium, with programmes often being screened live, the information transmitted by such remains filtered by media practitioners. Television has the potential to reach millions of viewers in their homes across the globe and therefore the task of gatekeepers becomes even more difficult in determining exactly who their society is and how the material screened will affect them. This, in turn, causes the

process of ethical decision making to be much harder for the media as they may not always be sure of the impact a particular show may have on viewers, especially if they have a global audience.

5. Entertainment value

Both news and entertainment are significant in transmitting the cultural heritage of an audience. In this way entertainment is recognised as a legitimate function of the mass media system. It may reflect the cultural nature of a society or it may assist in affecting that culture.

The primary ingredient of television is mass entertainment. This entertainment offers viewers diversion and amusement in a fast paced society. It also provides the viewer with relaxation and respite, which can be functional and beneficial to modern viewers. Most media consumers have the need to escape from the stresses of their everyday environment and may not only wish to be entertained, but also to withdraw and television assists them to do this (Day, 1991:327). However, media practitioners should be weary of distorting or trivialising, through entertainment, the problems experienced in society and here ethical questions frequently arise.

Entertainment has been viewed by some critics as an influence that can corrupt morals and negatively affect the good taste of the public (Day 1991:327). The reason for this may be that there are divergent views on the role of mass entertainment in society and what form it should take. Journalists have the specific function of contributing to the democratic process and reporting on occurrences, but entertainment does not have such a specific rationale. This has led to disagreement as to what modern entertainment should entail. It is uncertain whether it is sufficient for entertainment media to simply provide escapism to viewers, or whether there is an ethical obligation on media practitioners to elevate the taste of viewers. It is a moral dilemma that the media industry grapples with daily, as the content produced influences and affects viewers globally. Media practitioners should reflect the views

12

of society, as stated previously, however, where the degeneration of ethical values is detected, it may be their duty as moral agents and role models to attempt to uplift society. This does not mean that they should alienate themselves from their society and its needs and views, but it may be necessary to create entertainment that attempts to increase the artistic taste, and possibly moral values, of the viewing public.

Despite the apparent low quality of modern television entertainment, there are programmes that have received critical acclaim, such as *The Cosby Show* (Day 1991:326). These shows are well conceived, written and produced, even though they are aimed at entertainment, which illustrates that quality and entertainment are not mutually exclusive. In addition, it shows that television can entertain as well as enrich, even if at times the topics may appear trivial. The problem is that much of entertainment programming produced is purely trivial which spoils the image of this kind of television with its audience. Various reality programmes, which will be discussed hereafter, may fall into the category of trivial entertainment and add to the perception that entertainment television is useless.

The quality of journalism and entertainment may further be negatively affected by the apparent culture of sensationalism and escapism in American television. According to Day, this is evidenced by the intrusion of entertainment values into the news and information function of journalism. The appeal of tabloid journalism, the happy-talk format on television, the popularity of TV docu-dramas and "reality" programming are examples hereof he says (Day 1991:326). Also, the move away from the traditional coverage of hard news to a soft news format and features reflects this. The seriousness of the content may, by presenting it in this manner, may be undervalued by the average viewer and this is one of the challenges facing media practitioners. It may result therein that the media merely become conveyers of gossip and tabloid news if this is what viewers demand. In this way reality programming, in trying to keep the audience glued, may produce programming which debases the values of the audience, simply because they wish to keep them watching.

13

6. Commercialism

In a democratic society, the media produce content that they believe meets a perceived need of the heterogeneous mass audience. However, it appears that for modern broadcasters the industry has simply become about making money and profit, and not about providing a service to their society. The reason for this is that the media need to survive financially to remain in business and with the current competition this proves to present a challenge. Due to the commercialism of the modern media industry, practitioners hereof succumb to the pressure that they must be commercially successful in order to be in a position to provide more substantial content that may enrich and educate viewers. This means that broadcasters must air programmes, such as escapism television, that attract viewers in order to present any kind of service to their community. The result is that if the audience demands trivial and forgettable information, then escapism is what will keep television stations alive. Thus, because of commercialism it will occur that light entertainment will take precedence over more serious matter, if that is what the viewers demand. This, at times, may appear a contradiction, as morally reprehensible material may be what enables a station to provide, for example, a good news service. In this way broadcasters may be forced by finances to compromise their content. Despite this, commercialism should not be the only driving force in the production of popular entertainment and information, as media practitioners have a specific role to play in today's society as already discussed (Day, 1991:328).

The ways in which profit is gained by broadcasters is not necessarily evident to viewers. The audience often views television programming to be a source of free entertainment that is occasionally interrupted by advertising messages. However, the other side of the screen consists of an economic system of commercial broadcasting. In the United States for example, this involves nearly 1 100 television stations, four principal programming networks, dozens of programme suppliers, tens of thousands of companies with products or services to sell, and hundreds of advertising agencies (Allen 1992:17). What the American viewing audience receives represents the

14

intersection between that complex economic system and the two hundred million potential television viewers. Thus, the media industry today is a business like any other. The economic value of this system, measured strictly in terms of revenues generated by broadcasters, is more than twenty five billion US dollars per year in the United States alone (Allen, 1992:17). In South Africa, where the industry is comparatively small, the economic pressures however, remain as heavy because broadcasters still need to ensure financial viability.

Much of the profit made in the media industry is due to advertising revenues. Since the inception of broadcasting, advertising has been present. In television, advertising is, in essence, the sale of an audience to an advertiser by the station (Allen, 1992:19). Therefore, it is essential that broadcasters know their audience. They need to be aware of the size, constitution and likes of the viewers (Allen 1992:19). Furthermore, broadcasters must know what kind of audience watches the television at which times and what the demographics of those viewers are. Most of what is known about television audiences is measured by making a poll of a cross-section of viewers from the community. It is also helpful for broadcasters to learn how various groups of people decide what to watch, why they change channels, how much of that seen is remembered and which programmes which viewers prefer.

A Hollywood studio executive bluntly stated that, "The primary purpose of American television, as it's presently constituted, is to deliver an audience to an advertiser at the lowest cost per thousand. Quality, style, content - these are all matters of subjective taste, and they are important only as they relate to the rise and fall of ratings, which are the yardstick by which television time is sold" (Allen 1992:19). Ratings are the mechanism by which people watching television are made into a commodity to be sold in lots of one thousand (Allen 1992:19). Thereafter, broadcast airtime is purchased by companies in order to promote the sale of their goods or services. The price of thirty seconds of airtime is determined by the statistical probability that a certain number of people fitting certain demographic descriptions will be watching that television station at the specific moment that the advertisement is screened. From

the perspective of the advertiser, television programmes are the inducement that ensure that a specific audience is watching television to receive their messages. For the broadcaster, though, programming represents a cost as it must produce or obtain material that will ensure that viewers tune in (Allen 1992:19).

Reality television appears to have relatively low production costs and the ability to drive people to the station's internet site which, in the current economy, is an incentive for broadcasters to produce these kind of shows (Lowry 2001). Furthermore, certain reality television shows, such as *Big Brother*, have succeeded in tapping into specifically the youth market, which makes it easier for the station to sell airtime to the advertiser as they may be certain of reaching their target market. In the United Kingdom ten million people watched the climax to *Big Brother* and at its peak attracted fifty six percent of the entire television viewing audience in that country which translates into advertising success (Big Brother). While in France, the reality show *Loft Story* ensured that seventy five percent of the youth market (aged fifteen to twenty-four) was watching. This caused the relevant television station, M6, to move the show to its prime time slot, thereby causing the price of a thirty-second advertisement on this programme to triple (Crumley 2001). Similar reality shows across the globe document like success with record viewing numbers and the accompanying substantial increase in profit, illustrating the commercial nature of the modern media industry.

There are broadcasters though, particularly in less developed countries that struggle to survive financially and therefore are subsidised by the government of their country. This is not the ideal situation as it poses the possibility of censorship by the state and may endanger the watchdog function of the press. However, in many countries, South Africa being one of them, television stations are state funded in an effort to ensure their livelihood. On the other hand, without this funding these broadcasters will not be able to provide their audience with serious news content or educational television, which ultimately is to the detriment of the society. Such television stations should strive to maintain their independence and bring quality viewing to their audience,

however, this may at times prove to be difficult where government pressure is applied. Media practitioners in this position will then be faced with various ethical challenges and have to weigh up all the relevant issues in order to reach determination which is ethically acceptable.

7. What is "reality television"?

Reality programming is a hybrid of television genres, including the game show and pseudo-sports competition. Generally, reality television is created by placing ordinary persons in a particular environment where cameras capture their actions and communications with other participants. It may involve the participants performing specific tasks in that environment, or they may have the chance to tell their own story on television. Reality programming may take various forms, including talk or game shows. The duration of the shows may vary and the prize for taking part may differ greatly from one show to the next. Some reality-based shows offer no prize money and the individual simply attains the chance to be on television, while in other cases vast prizes are on offer to the winner.

Reality-based shows do not contain a well-considered narrative or plot. The concept is instead to place everyday individuals who the audience can identify with in front of the camera without a script and allow the individual to decide what they wish to say or how to act. This move away from narrative already began early in the twentieth century as part of the post-modernist movement (Gabler 2000). Plot means that there is a sense of logic and order which suited the nineteenth century belief in the progress and perfectibility of man. However, the thinking evolved in the twentieth century to a sense that man was lurching aimlessly and this period was embodied by fragmentation and dislocation. Before reality viewing producers were in search of a story that would engage their audience. The aim was to evoke emotion from the audience and cause them to experience this while watching the programme. Plot is a mechanism with which to awaken this kind of emotional experience and therefore great writers are able to manipulate their audience hereby (Gabler 2000). However,

not all writers succeed in guiding the audience's emotions in this manner which has caused filmmakers to resort to a more reliable means of obtaining the reaction they are in search of, namely technology. Through technology special effects and sounds are created that indeed have the ability to grab the audience's attention and emotion. This has led to the huge Hollywood blockbuster movies with little plot, but much action.

This, in turn, Gabler (2000) argues, has created a whole generation of viewers, particularly in the United States of America, who are oblivious to the non-existence of plot in movies and television viewing. Due to the fact that the movie industry in the US is so successful the movies generated by these trendsetters are distributed throughout the globe. The consequence hereof is that not only in America does such a generation of viewers exist, but that this is indeed a world wide occurrence. The popularity of reality television can to a degree be assigned to this occurrence as people do not seem to care that no plot is present in this form of programming.

Further, an effect of globalisation and the internet has been that people have been exposed to much more than previously the case, even if experienced vicariously through the medium of television, radio or the World Wide Web. This has had the result that viewers have become hungry to see more and novel things, which reality television has somehow succeeded in bringing to them. It appears that in our modern society people need to have the feeling that they are experiencing something first-hand and in a way reality television provides this, a factor which also contributed to the prevalence of this programming.

Much debate has surrounded the popularity of reality television and whether media practitioners should air programmes which fall in this category. There are those who believe that if the audience demands only entertainment from the media such as gossip, crossword puzzles, disc jockeys, comic books and situation comedies such should be provided (Day 1991:27). The producers of mass entertainment appear to believe that if the audience demands certain programmes, then those are the shows

18

they will produce, particularly because of the competitive nature of the media industry and the fact that they need to survive economically. However as a result of tough competition, critics and viewers have an important task to continually demand accountability from the various role-players in the industry. They need to demand explanations from these moral agents to ensure that ethical values are taken into consideration by practitioners and not simply commercial issues. Viewers need to be aware that the media industry is a big business and view it in this way, which means that content screened should not simply be accepted but rather watched from a critical perspective by society.

8. Illustrations of reality shows

Reality-based programming has many divergent forms in that the shows created have different approaches, settings, contestants, hosts, duration and prizes. It is necessary to consider the different kinds of shows that are on offer to viewers as reality television in South Africa in order to determine the ethical challenges they offer modern media practitioners. Most reality shows screened in this country originate from the United States, although modern reality television began in Europe and has spread over the globe. Currently there are approximately forty reality shows broadcast world wide (Kerviel 2001).

About thirty years before the label of reality television was attached to such shows, an early form of reality programming was visible in the form of documentaries produced by the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) (Bauer 2001). *The Family,* for example, exposed the lives of ordinary British families over a period of a year, revealing their everyday experiences and hardships. In order to achieve this, cameras were installed all over the house of participants often revealing arguments about money, sex, parenting and various other mundane topics. According to Bauer this form of television was dubbed "fly-on-the-wall" television at the time and caused controversy regarding the limits of good taste and "the pornographic potential of such naked exposure to private lives." At about the same time in the United States, PBS

19

screened its own portrait of daily life, *An American Family,* with the MTV show *The Real World*, created by Mary-Ellis Bunim and Jonathan Murray airing in that country about a decade ago (Kennedy 2000). These earlier shows were indeed market driven, but it appears that current shows are extremely focused on the monetary aspects. Where the initial programs already stirred controversy, they appear to have an artistic value when compared to the celebrity-driven shows now produced. Today, most contestants are there purely for money, exposure and fame. Many contestants do not seem interested in the ultimate prize money, but view such a programme as the starting block to a career in the entertainment industry and a chance for financial gain in that way (Bauer 2001).

In 1989 a television infatuation with the recreation of recent events emerged. This resulted in the unholy alliance between news and drama and attracted criticism of unethical practices (Day 1991:344). This was because the programmes were being packaged as reality, but a touch of drama was added to make the show more interesting for the viewer. Entertainment values have never been far removed from television news, but according to Day these "dramatizations carry the bastardization of electronic journalism to its ultimate conclusion" (Day 1991:344). Programmes have to be clearly discernible as either news or drama to the audience, otherwise the danger exists that the seriousness of the news will not be conveyed. Drama should not be included in a news broadcast, and these docu-dramas have to be very careful not to cross this line. Re-creation shows appear to have gained a place on future television, however, as such continue to be produced. The docu-drama can be considered a form of reality television as true events are produced into a television programme aimed at gripping viewers, although there is no monetary prize at stake. In South Africa, many of these shows can be viewed on the *Reality TV* channel found on the DSTV satellite broadcaster. Day feels that such re-creations are evidence of the extent to which commercial self-interest can obscure the moral imperatives of social responsibility (Day 1991:344). This may be so, however, positive aspects can also be attributed to some of these programmes in that viewers may be educated in the process. This is evident from programmes such as *Rescue 911* which has proved to teach many

viewers how to resuscitate a person or South Africa's *Red Alert,* screened on E-TV, which serves to inform the public of the work done in their community by emergency personnel.

Reality-based talk shows seem to be on the increase, with hosts doing their utmost to solicit reaction from the participants and studio audience. The American *The Jerry Springer Show* has generated so much popularity that Jerry Springer has been credited as the king of reality television. Ordinary individuals appear on the show declaring shocking revelations to the nation. This often involves ambush television on the side of the producers to ensure that some participants will appear on the show and frequently turns into a screaming match, involving bad language and violence. The topics of the show are aimed at sensationalism and mostly appeal to the most basic instincts of viewers, the subjects generally including sex or pregnancy. However, even though these are normal citizens speaking about their lives without a script there is nothing ordinary about the situation. Individuals are placed on a stage to reveal their secrets on national television, which cannot be considered a normal way to deal with their problems. Programmes such as these do not encourage the formation of artistic tastes in viewers. These shows are, rather, indicative of the state of society if participants believe that this is the correct way to deal with issues. If television is seen by individuals as the answer to their problems and viewers accept this kind of content on their screen, modern society faces great moral challenges.

Another form of reality programming is the game show type format. An example of this show kind is the internationally renowned *Survivor.* Based on a Swedish version of the show, the American Central Broadcasting Service (CBS) bought the rights to the survival competition programme. The initial *Survivor* placed sixteen castaways on an uninhabited island off Borneo for thirty-nine days, which were packaged into thirteen weekly one-hour episodes of television. It grabbed the attention of the public with fifty-two million American viewers tuning in when it was first shown and resulted that two more series were made thereafter. The concept is similar to a kind of game show, dividing participants into so-called tribes and exposing them to a variety

of tests and competitions. Each week the losing group has to vote out a member of their tribe, until one contestant remains, winning the prize of one million dollars. The participants are carefully selected to ensure conflict and excitement for viewers. The producers argue that the show presents real people having authentic experiences to that which they are exposed, without instruction from anyone.

A reality show that has spurned a number of different versions the world over is *Big Brother,* structured on the pre-television concept of an all-seeing eye found in the George Orwell novel *1984.* The first *Big Brother* was screened in Holland in September 1999 and immediately became extremely popular, generating much interest in the show from critics and viewers. Subsequently the show was staged in, among others, Germany, Spain, the United States of America, the United Kingdom, Portugal, Switzerland, Sweden, Belgium and South Africa. This show involves placing approximately ten contestants in a specially constructed house for around one hundred days. The housemates are deprived of all contact with the outside world, with the exception of their talks with Big Brother in the diary room. Cameras and microphones are installed throughout the house in order to catch every move. The entire concept of the game is that viewers have the opportunity to see all that happens in the house at all times. Cameras are even installed in the shower, while some countries also placed a camera in the toilet. The contestants are eliminated on a regular basis as the contestants have to nominate two persons from their midst for eviction and the audience is invited to vote for the housemate they wish to evict that week. The contestants are then evicted until only one remains to claim the substantial cash prize.

Thus, contestants effectively live in a fishbowl with viewers being able to experience every moment that occurs in the house. However, much of this is edited into shorter programmes by producers, who effectively take the material and choose what they think is entertaining to viewers. Therefore, it may occur that the housemates may be portrayed in a manner that is not necessarily true, as the material may be cut to manipulate what may be an ordinary situation into an exciting moment for viewers, if

22

taken out of context. Garth Ancier of NBC Entertainment illustrated this when he stated, "In scripted programming, the horse that pulls the cart is the writer. But in reality [television], it's all about the producer" (Adalian 2000). *Big Brother* has been highly popular with viewers and it is reported that in the United Kingdom more people voted for which housemate should be evicted than voted during their national election (Big Brother).

In Britain, the BBC decided not to take on *Big Brother* due to its target market and the image it wishes to portray. It did however, make *Castaway 2000* which the BBC describes as a "serious sociological experiment" (Kennedy 2000). The show is set on an island and consists of participants taken from a cross-section of society who are filmed there for a year. Their trials, tribulations and pressures are captured by the camera, while a resident psychologist is available to assist at all times. The programme appears very similar to other reality-based programming, except that there is no monetary prize awarded at the finish. It would seem that this show only differs from the more game show orientated reality programming in degree, not in type. However, this may not be entirely true as the motivation of individuals to take part in *Castaway* has more to do with their inner state and what they may be able to achieve if placed in a new community, than merely competing for money and fame.

The host of other recent reality television programmes to have sprung up in the last year include *Temptation Island* where married contestants are sexually tempted by the single participants, and *Love Cruise* where contestants are encouraged to find a partner, with much sexual energy being encouraged by producers. In addition, there is *The Mole* that features one person placed among contestants to deliberately sabotage the tasks given to the group. Also, the wildly successful British *Pop Idols* is currently screened on South African television in which a huge search for a teenage pop idol is launched. Other reality shows include *Boot Camp, Chains of Love, Big Diet* to name but a few.

23

In South Africa, reality-based programming has been available to viewers for some time, in larger doses if satellite television is installed in their homes. However, it was the local version of the lock-up show, *Big Brother South Africa,* broadcast on the pay station M-Net and DSTV, that caught the attention of most of this country's viewing public. As the first home grown true reality show, *Big Brother SA,* placed twelve ordinary housemates in a specially designed home in Randburg, Gauteng for one hundred and six days. The advent of the show in August 2001 grabbed the imagination of the South African audience and sparked debate in this country about the rise of reality television. The show indeed presented some uniquely South African moments and problems, as well as its share of bad language and sexual tension, even violent outbreaks by one of the contestants. However, it proved to be what the audience wanted to see with more than one and a half million viewers calling in simply for one of the weekly evictions.

Other local productions scheduled to be produced in 2002 include a South African version of *Pop Idols*, where the search for our own individual pop star will be on. Also, the SABC3 version of *Popstars* where the formation of a band is followed by viewers is scheduled for the coming year. In addition, *The Summit* can be seen on E-TV which takes a group of people interested in a certain field, for instance boxing, and gives them the opportunity to train for this in the hope of coming out on top. In this way local reality television may have positive spin-offs as individuals may receive opportunities not otherwise available to them. Thus, it appears that reality television fever has caught on in South Africa, as in the rest of the world, and various other local and international shows can be expected in the near future.

9. Reflections on reality television

From the above it is evident that various types of reality television programmes have emerged over the past few decades. It appears that the revival of this form of programming in the second half of the nineteen nineties has renewed the focus on reality shows and the ethical challenges coupled therewith, particularly in our modern

24

society. When considering the ethical responsibilities of the media relative to reality television, the picture may become blurred as it appears to contain concepts and material that are on the verge of acceptability or rejection by the viewing audience.

The various reality shows are quite different in subject, even though they do not vary much in form, and thus reveal different ethical dilemmas for media practitioners. Firstly, some critics have raised the question as to how ethical it is for the media to sell a programme as being real, i.e. reflecting the true circumstances of a situation, when it is an inherent trait of television that it deceives. The question of how the term "reality" may be understood is an issue that in itself may be debated, however when discussing the ethical dilemmas surrounding this phenomenon, the true meaning of the term is not the issue. Suffice to say that people connect their own definite response to the word "reality" and that it may in fact be more accurate to rather speak of "a reality" (Wasserman 2001). Generally, though, events that occur everyday cannot be distorted by any outside interference, even though individuals may have differing views when interpreting such. On television, however, producers are able to manipulate an audience as the editing process may add, take away, distort or change the context of what may in fact have happened. This is possible by cutting certain scenes or placing stronger focus on some persons and their behaviour than others. Therefore, the name reality television has been described by Stephen Winzenburg, communications professor at Grand View College in Des Moines, USA, as a misnomer as it does not reflect occurrences in a true manner (Kennedy 2000). Beebe describes these shows as being "utterly divorced from reality", as in everyday life a group of people will not be placed in isolation in an expensive house or on an exotic island where they vote off others. The concept is artificial in the extreme, however, Von Klemperer airs the opinion that "at least, apart from the name, there is no attempt to hide the unreality of Reality TV, 21st century style." She goes further to confirm that there is no hidden political agenda and that the message that "the prospect of big money corrupts is in the viewer's face all the time." It is true that this message is conveyed by many reality television shows, however, these programmes appear to actually condone this kind of behaviour. In other words, these shows are telling

25

viewers that it is acceptable to society if money corrupts them, and this is cannot be the acceptable. Thus, media practitioners need to weigh up the commercial success of reality television against their role of reflecting the moral values of their community and decide which interest is more significant. The potential for further decline in ethical determinations by media practitioners is increased by this kind of programming and somewhere the industry must draw a line to ensure that harmful material, such as pornography, does not reach into the homes of viewers.

Beebe prefers to describe reality television as improvisational television. Indeed, the individuals taking part in these programmes do not have scripts and are not told when to speak or what to say, thus improvising what happens next. Such may be a more accurate way of describing this form of programming. However, the term reality television has been attached to these shows and in an industry where truth is the goal for most media practitioners and journalists, it is unfortunate that this is the name attached to this form of entertainment. Entertainment of the viewer is however what reality shows strive for. They wish to keep audiences tuned in in order to increase their station's profitability. Even though this programming has been named such, viewers are aware that shows such as *Survivor* and *Big Brother* have been devised to entertain them. The programmes often emphasise that there is a game being played and the audience may even be invited to participate in the game by, for instance, voting a contestant off the show. This is very far from any kind of reality and the audience does realise this. However, reality talk shows present a greater challenge for audiences as it is more difficult to distinguish the inherent distortion of the truth by television.

Big Brother stressed further ethical questions regarding reality television. As the show is about twenty-four hour surveillance of housemates, scenes include the shower, and possibly also the toilet. In France, reality television sparked much controversy and even outrage in sections of the community. The show, entitled *Loft Story,* structured on the model of *Big Brother,* began broadcasting on a private television station in that country at the beginning of May 2001 (Crumley 2001). The

ten contestants were locked in a camera filled house, which included the shower and toilet. Protest arose as it was viewed as an insult to the dignity of contestants and the intelligence of viewers. Protestors dumped garbage in front of the television station and hundreds tried to storm the broadcaster's studio. The result was that the French TV watchdog intervened and asked the channel to change the rules of the game, which included two hours of privacy a day (Kerviel 2001). It seems that thus far France is the only country where any form of intervention by a recognised body has been successful. However, if contestants are allowed time away from the camera, it may be argued that the game should then simply be cancelled as the attraction to viewers is largely the all-seeing nature of the camera which allows them access to every occurrence.

These explicit shows caused critics to question the ethical acceptability of allowing media practitioners to package a person's life into a box in the hope of reaping financial gain from it. It further raises the issue as to whether, in our information age, there is anything that may still be sacred and not for an audience to scrutinise. It appears that viewers are becoming more hungry for things never seen before. In a time where there is access to all over the World Wide Web, television has attempted to satisfy viewer demands in order to compete for profit, which may ultimately be at the expense of the viewer. David Miller, of the Media Research Institute at the University of Stirling in the USA confirmed, "I think there's a very genuine problem with *Big Brother* as well as many of the other programmes genres, and not just in damaging the contestants but I think in damaging us as viewers" (Frostrup 2001).

In reality-based programming on television there seems to be a pattern of increased explicitness and voyeurism according to Miller (Frostrup 2001). Winzenburg, airs the opinion that shows such as *Big Brother* and *Survivor* reflect the ongoing decline in media morality (Kennedy 2000). He criticised the shows saying that they bring out the worst in human behaviour and that it is "basically survival of the fittest, and people are treated as animals" (Kennedy 2000). It is indeed so that this is the message that many reality shows may send to viewers, however one should bear in mind that

27

participants of reality game shows are there voluntarily and are aware of the purpose for why they are there. On the other hand, these shows do reveal that commercialism is a great driving force for many practitioners and that they are willing to place any material on air if it is to ensure their financial success. This reveals that profit can at times be an overriding factor in considering what material to air which may result therein that more explicit and morally unacceptable content, such as sex, violence and nudity, may be screened. In this way there does appear to be a decline in media morality, particularly if the internet and the information found there is considered. Specifically with regards to television this can be seen in shows such as *The Jerry Springer Show*. The show is always attempting to find a new twist and has recently taken its cameras into the trailer parks of America in search of raw unedited misery. Richard Dominick, executive producer of T*he Jerry Springer Show,* stated that their team films "whatever the problem is, but do not add or take away from it". Even if this is the case, though, the issue is whether they should be broadcasting it to the world to see to begin with. When viewing these shows it does seem as if there is a new extreme in cruel voyeurism on television. Many producers are of the opinion that there is public demand for such programming, thus they will produce these shows (Frostrup 2001). Indeed the ratings may indicate the popularity of these kind of shows, however media practitioners need to apply moral reasoning when considering these programmes. The ethical values of reaping financial benefit from the misery of others should be considered. In addition, reflection should be given to the role model status many reality show hosts and contestants gain, and whether as such practitioners do not have a duty to rather produce material that may uplift society instead of relying on sensationalism and the basic instincts of individuals. *The Oprah Winfrey* show is an illustration of how the host, Oprah Winfrey, has attempted to use her role model status in a positive manner and present shows with an encouraging message to the audience in the hope that they may uplift the standards of her viewers. It may not simply be the media industry that is experiencing moral decline, but indeed society as a whole, however media practitioners should remember their role in society and attempt to influence their viewers in a positive manner.

28

Another issue that has arisen surrounding reality television is how gatekeepers filter the information gathered when filming for these programmes. The way in which gatekeepers control the material is illustrated by *Survivor* where the show is pasted in such a way that a new sin is revealed every week. In constructing a scene as sexually tense or dangerous, gatekeepers encourage the audience to remain in front of their sets. The sins are, however, unfolded in such a way that they communicate to viewers that such behaviour is acceptable which may not be the case in a society of diversity. Winzenburg claims that these sins are for example not morally acceptable in Christian households (Kennedy 2000). In addition, gatekeepers of reality television have been accused of re-staging various scenes of specific shows and that the audience is not seeing incidents that occurred within the games. This was highlighted when the producer of the wildly successful *Survivor*, Mark Burnett, admitted that many moments in the series had been re-staged. He claimed that none of the re-enactments had, though, been vital to the outcome of the show and the determination of the winner. According to Burnett the moments were simply window dressing to add more drama and that the authenticity of the show was in no way diminished hereby. This may be so but such actions do not encourage confidence in the media industry as a whole, and rather promote a negative picture of the reliability of practitioners.

Despite this, the *Survivor* show faired better than predicted in capturing human drama says Thompson, a US television lecturer for the last nineteen years (Kennedy 2000). The exotic game show had strong characters, no drug use, infrequent profanity, and rare sexual situations, which in effect makes the programme family viewing. Furthermore, the show was successful in exposing moments of insight into human relationships that cannot be replicated in sitcoms, thus living up to the idea of entertainment by everyday individuals. In addition, Thompson points out that some of the longer lasting contestants on such shows are often not the beautiful people seen on sitcoms, which seems to be a more accurate reflection of society and indeed more popular with viewers (Kennedy 2000). Indeed this is a positive aspect to reality television as it is easier for people to identify with contestants. However, this may

29

also be a negative result as the material viewed is often mindless and without substance, and the contestants behaviour morally reprehensible.

Reality television is viewed as a product to be sold to advertisers in the competitive media industry. Bernd Schmitt, author of *Experiential Marketing* and a business professor at Columbia University in the USA, argues that reality television is "about interactions, about creating reality through conversations, through discourse, and that is the product" (Utley 2000). It's not only that reality television viewers want to be part of the lives of a few people in a house, on television and online. According to Schmitt, they actually seem happy to be part of the commercial experience and explains that it is the business behind *Big Brother* and *Survivor*, the quest for fame and a small fortune and what people will go through to get to them, that is today's true reality (Schmitt in Utley 2000). This may be so, however, from an ethical perspective, rather than a commercial one, this does not bode well for society and again highlights the obligations of media practitioners to make decisions after considering the ethical implications on viewers. The content of *Big Brother* has the potential to at times contain sex, swearing and violence. Producers have the ability to manipulate this by providing contestants with more alcohol or asking provocative questions in the diary room. That is where broadcasters need to make ethical decisions and determine how to handle such behaviour. The producers of *Big Brother* openly advertise the sex that takes place on the show on their official website in a bid to attract viewers which is indicative of the stance they have toward this kind of material.

In addition to the impact on viewers, the issue of the treatment and impact of the show on participants has been raised by critics and contestants. In Britain, some participants of *Big Brother* were of the opinion that they had not been adequately psychologically prepared for the claustrophobic, restricted and strange environment in which they were placed. In addition, they felt that they had been misled about what would happen to them in the house (Frostrup 2001). However, Gary Carter, of Endemol Entertainment International who produced the show, reacted that the company was "extremely concerned" about the safety of the participants in all

television programmes. He argued that it is important for the company to take care of their interests, which includes participants. Contestants are prepared for the game by receiving a series of warnings and thereafter a psychologist is available at all times. The participants were unaware of how the editing and selection process took place and had no idea of how they were being portrayed to the audience.

After the show, some of the participants felt that the editors had portrayed them in a particular light, being either positive or negative, by merely touching a button. *Big Brother* was so popular in the United Kingdom that it developed the power to overnight transform one of the contestants, Nick Bateman, into the most evil man in Britain (Frostrup 2001). After the show, Bateman commented, "I think one of the problems with the whole show is the public thought it was real. They lost sight of it that it was a game show, and it became very personal to every member of the public watching it" (Frostrup 2001). Feelings of viewers ran so high that there were concerns Bateman would be assassinated (Big Brother). It may be true that this pervasive show became part of the lives of the viewers who had housemates as constant companions. Also, *Big Brother* fulfilled a socialising function in the lives of many, as it provided a topic of continued conversation. Contestants may not have realised the impact of the show on the audience, however, they chose to expose all to the camera. Overnight celebrity status and the prying eye of viewers may though require more in depth preparation and assistance from the production company to the participants and this needs to be considered by broadcasters.

10. Effect on the public and actions of individuals

An ethical situation can be evaluated in terms of its effects on an individual or the audience as a whole. Moral agents, such as media practitioners, have a duty to consider the impact of their behaviour on their audience (Day 1991:15). The media themselves recognise their role as moral agents, as well as their duty to the audience. This is revealed by, for example, the system of movie ratings, as well the more recent system of rating television programmes, that place an age restriction on certain

31

programmes to alert the audience that the material may contain morally offensive matter. The content referred to may be matter such as sex, violence, or language that may not be suitable for younger or sensitive viewers.

Since the advent of broadcast audience research in the nineteen thirties, the investigation has concentrated on two major areas. Broadcasters and advertisers have been interested primarily in measuring the audience, i.e. determining the audience and their demographics. The statistical probability of viewers at a given time is essential to ensure a successful economic relationship between broadcasters and advertisers. The power of commercial advertising to affect consumer purchasing decisions long ago provoked concern among academic researchers and other groups that first radio, and then television, might have deleterious consequences for audience members (Allen 1992:127). A consequence hereof is that researchers, for this reason, have attempted to discern the effects of watching television upon various audience groups. Their research has led them to surmise that, for example, television violence might encourage aggressive behaviour among children, or that viewing stereotypical portrayals of various social groups might reinforce prejudices in the viewer. Furthermore, they have concluded that viewing so-called heavy television may generally be associated with perceptions of the world as dangerous by the audience. This strong line of effects research prompted other scholars to investigate television viewing not in terms of effects, but in terms of the functions that particular type of programming might serve for particular viewing groups. For example, the fact that soap operas have such a large audience has been explained in terms of the viewer's need for vicarious social interaction or problem solving (Allen 1992:133). In Britain, Dorothy Hobson investigated the specific relationship of female viewers to the soap operas produced there. She suggests the viewing experience is in some cases simply the start of the way in which television becomes part of other aspects of the viewer's everyday life. Hobson conducted her research by interviewing female office workers during their lunch hours. This revealed that soap operas provided a focus for socialization for these women. According to Hobson the women shared, challenged, revised and continually reformed their understandings of the show's plots and

32

character relationships (Allen 1991:133). This illustrates that viewers make television relevant, meaningful and pleasurable in their lives. The actual viewing of television shows is, however, only the beginning of the process as what is experienced may be carried beyond the immediate viewing environment by the individual. This was evident when the *Big Brother* reality show aired in South Africa as many people talked about the contestants at work or with friends. Furthermore, daily articles were published in local newspapers discussing the show and its contestants which also promoted discussion of the topic. In this manner socialisation as a function of television was clearly illustrated.

Thus, there is undeniably a social nature to watching television. The fact that millions of viewers are receiving and watching the same images simultaneously make watching television a social phenomenon. When persons partake in reality shows, the fact that so many people are observing them is something participants realise and often strive for, however, this can also have a negative impact if the person is bullied and leaves the show humiliated.

On screen humiliation has a long tradition in the United States of America where it is sold to the audience as entertainment in daytime talk shows. The programmes appear to be becoming increasingly extreme, and may cause participants such distress that they revert to irrational actions. A prime example of this the *The Jerry Springer Show*. In an interview screened on M-Net's *Carte Blanche* on 19 August 2001, Springer described his programme as "just a silly show" (Frostrup 2001). He aired the opinion that what makes his show different from others is that people who would normally never have been on television have the opportunity to be there. This is indeed one of the main reasons why individuals wish to participate on his show as they wish to have their proverbial fifteen minutes of fame. However, American talk shows rely on the real experiences of everyday people to conjure up sensationalism and grip viewers. This means that they inevitably exploit the volunteers and many participants agree to appear only after they have been brought there under false

pretences. The programme then tries to provide the veneer of respectability to it by inviting psychologists to participate.

Many of these shows, however, continually attempt to somehow shock the audience as this seems to be a means to up ratings and ensure the financial success of their show. This, however, may have devastating and long-term consequences. The case of Jonathan Schmitz illustrates how ambush television can affect the lives of individuals and their families to the extreme. He was led to believe by the *Jenny Jones Show* that he was going on television to be introduced to the woman of his dreams. Schmitz was only told that he had a secret admirer and he agreed to appear. However, once on the show, Schmitz discovered that the admirer was a gay acquaintance, Scott Amadure. Schmitz, though, was not able to deal with the public humiliation he had been subjected to. The incident resulted therein that Schmitz shot Scott Amadure three days after the show and he was sentenced to life imprisonment for second degree murder (Frostrup 2001). The prosecutor at his trial, Donna Pendergast, argued that he was fully responsible for his actions, but nevertheless acknowledged that television producers do have some sort of responsibility to their guests. It seems as if the judiciary indeed acknowledged such a responsibility exists as, in a separate civil case, Warner Brothers, the producers of the show, were held culpable and the family of the deceased was awarded twenty five million US dollars in damages (Frostrup 2001).

Also in the United States, another recent murder to be connected with the excesses of reality television took place in Sarasota, Florida. It involved yet another case of ambush television in which Nancy Panitz was persuaded to appear on *The Jerry Springer Show*. The cover story told to Panitz was that her previous husband Ralph wished to reconcile with her. This was not the case as Ralph and his girlfriend subjected Nancy to ritual humiliation, telling her that they no longer wanted her in their lives. Three months after the actual recording, Ralph Panitz watched the show and he snapped. Even though his ex-wife was the victim of humiliation, it appeared that he was not equipped to deal with the situation and it is alleged that later that day Ralph Panitz bludgeoned Nancy to death in her home (Frostrup 2001).

34

This reality show took an already volatile and unstable relationship and exploited it on air, creating more hurt and embarrassment in order to achieve audience response. This raises the question as to whether this specific form of reality television is indeed a legitimate function of entertainment and what duties it then creates for the media practitioners involved. The attitude of Springer is that the death of Nancy Panitz has nothing to do with his show and it is not for him to broach the area of censorship (Frostrup 2001). Would this then mean that even if the media practitioner sees the potential for harm the show will be broadcast otherwise he/she would be applying censorship? It may be necessary for practitioners to discern between what is newsworthy to the public and what is simply mindless entertainment. Such reality programming is mostly just trivial entertainment and where there is no pressing need for the audience to have insight into in it, it may rather be in the public interest if practitioners do not broadcast certain material. Whether a specific programme should be broadcast will then be an ethical question for the media practitioner to consider based on ethical principles. It may indeed be the case that if moral reasoning is applied, the moral agent may find that it would serve the audience better not to show the programme. Though, the commercial aspects cannot be forgotten and hence many practitioners in our modern industry may lose sight thereof that they need to make such a determination. In such situations, ordinary individuals who already have problems in their lives are used for the financial gain of the media industry, and thus viewers need to place more pressure on practitioners if they believe that there has been an ethical transgression. .

In the *Carte Blanche* programme Springer pointed out that "at some point we have to stop always passing the blame, people have to be responsible for their own behaviours and if someone chooses to go on television, that's their responsibility" (Frostrup 2001). It is true that individuals need to accept responsibility for their own actions, however, the situation is not black and white. Many times the persons do not realise how they will react in a certain situation. In addition, the individuals who are ambushed into appearing on the show do not have much choice once filming has

35

started. More importantly though, media practitioners are moral agents and, particularly where financial gain is reaped, there is a responsibility to the participants and society which they serve to disclose their true intentions. If this is not done, media practitioners should not be able to deny all responsibility in the incidents that may occur thereafter.

11. Creating an ethical environment

There are those that feel that the study of ethics cannot really assist media practitioners in the workplace. It is indeed so that the true situation and pressures in the industry cannot fully be considered by students in the classroom, however, the study of ethics may go a long way in laying an ethical foundation for future practitioners. By deliberating over ethical issues, students have the opportunity to form their own opinions on ethical questions, while at the same time learning how others formulate their beliefs. This in itself teaches that diversity will usually exist when ethical issues are raised and if the individual has considered the various aspects of the dilemma and can motivate the reason for drawing a specific conclusion, such will often be enough to justify the decision.

Day advocates that there are several means of improving the ethical environment of media institutions, other than in the classroom (Day 1991:345). Firstly, media managers should identify the moral standards of their organizations and codify those principles. Thus, codes of conduct will assist practitioners to make ethical decisions as they will be aware of the stance of their organisation towards certain issues. Even where particular ethical questions are not addressed in the code, practitioners will at the very least be inspired to deliberate the ethical problems and possibly still be guided by the code. Where such principles are codified, Day argues that the public should be informed of the existence of such a code of conduct, as well as of the standards of behaviour expected from the media professionals in terms thereof. Secondly, media managers should conduct regular sessions on ethical standards and conduct in order to improve the moral climate of their institutions (Day 1991:345).

36

Finally, media practitioners should encourage public examination of ethical problems. The advent of *Big Brother South Africa* indeed inspired such deliberation from various sectors of society. Day is of the opinion that such self-examination will take serious reflection on the part of journalists (Day 1991:346). It is important for media practitioners, who constantly stand in criticism of others and their moral behaviour, to consider their own ethical conduct just as carefully. Movies such as *Ed TV* and *The Truman Show* are illustrations of self-criticism by the media industry. These movies investigated issues such as the prying eye of the camera and the pervasive influence it may have on the lives of individuals. However, this has not discouraged media practitioners from, in essence, selling the lives of contestants to the public that may reflect the significance of money in the industry.

The media does to a large extent reflect their society and the moral values of their culture. Where there is a change in ethical standards of the media, one can expect to find a similar change in the ethical standards of viewing audiences at large. However, as argued above, media practitioners are viewed as role models in society and as such should be leaders in the moral revival of their audiences if deemed necessary.

A further manner in which to encourage an ethical environment originates from the public themselves. It is so that media practitioners have a special role in society which carries certain rights, such as freedom of the press, but also responsibilities. The public should demand accountability from the media industry for that which they produce as it is the responsibility of media practitioners to protect and serve the society of which they form part. If communities are dissatisfied with the ethical standards of media content, which includes entertainment such as reality television, they should demand explanations for the material and seek content with a stronger moral tone. In South Africa, the Broadcasting Complaints Commission may provide a means for viewers to indicate their dissatisfaction of certain programming. Viewers need to be critical of what they watch and be selective when choosing which programmes to view instead of becoming mindless slaves to the television set. This

means that the audience should not simply rely on television to provide them with their major source of entertainment and information, but rather expand their horizons.

12. Reality Television in the future

Modern society is of such a nature that individuals are increasingly exposed to more things. It is an information rich society where the boundaries of acceptability are constantly being eroded due to greater access through the internet and other forms of technology. It is now possible for any individual to place most any material on the World Wide Web which can then be accessed by any person. This has the result that the boundaries of acceptability as to what should or should not be screened on television are also expanding with the result that content which previously would have been regarded as morally reprehensible is aired. Stations necessarily need to remain competitive in order to grip viewers, and thus may feel pressured to screen such material. If viewers accept this, they are not blameless for that which they are exposed to, and it may even at times be at their demand that such is screened. However this does not discharge media practitioners of their responsibility as role models and moral agents to screen morally acceptable material.

The future of reality television appears unpredictable. With the emergence of a string of popular reality-based programmes in the past few years, critics wondered whether this was simply a fad or if it represented the future of television. The United States was fast to hook onto the phenomenon of reality television. *Survivor* soon became the top rated show in that country which caused media scholars to predict that reality-based programmes were the way of the future (Kennedy 2000). The events of 11 September 2001 in the United States, however, changed the lives of millions of people globally. The World Trade Centre in New York collapsed after terrorists forced two airliners to fly into the building, killing thousands. On the same day a portion of the Pentagon building in Washington DC was destroyed also after an airliner was crashed into it by terrorists. These events changed not only the American nation, but viewers world wide as they witnessed this tragedy first-hand on television.

38

The result is that it impacted on their lives, even if they were not directly connected to the tragedy. However, the fact that viewers themselves saw the plane fly into the building and the collapse thereafter most likely also changed television. These events were real, there were no actors or contestants or specially devised programmes. The immediate result was that many television shows were postponed or altered, in order to show sensitivity to the tragedy. In the long-term, entertainment television will not be able to bring viewers something they have not seen before, as in effect the incident of September 11 were previously unthinkable. This may mean that producers are now more sensitive to the content of material screened, but may mean that in future they may attempt to screen even larger and more dramatic scenes in order to capture viewers. One opponent to reality television commented before the tragedy, "It is only a matter of time before someone comes up with the idea of committing a murder or assault on camera" (Von Klemperer 2001). After the horror surrounding the terrorist attacks subsides, this may indeed be the next step in reality programming.

It appears that at present, though, the American viewers' desire to watch unscripted programming has diminished. (The Union Leader 2001) Ratings of these shows dropped considerably, however, whether this is a permanent phenomenon remains to be seen. Furthermore, it seems that currently the United States is experiencing an overabundance of similar reality programmes, which may also explain the slump in ratings. In South Africa, though, reality television is just getting started comparatively, and with the huge popularity of *Big Brother South Africa* more reality-based programmes are in the making locally with international favourites also on the agenda (St Leger 2001). Thus, the phenomenon of reality television will at least be viewed in this country screen for the next year, as producers attempt to reap the maximum financial benefit from this form of programming.

Big Brother raises an interesting issue in that when viewers watch twenty-four hour surveillance it is essentially like watching grass grow. Thus, one wonders how long this will keep viewers occupied and what lengths producers will go to in order to ensure that reality-based programming remains popular. It does seem,

39

notwithstanding the events of September 11, that reality programming is set to contain racier material in order to ensure large audiences. With reality television in South Africa being relatively novel this has not really come into play in this country but foreign versions of *Big Brother*, for example, already contain racier material. The programme featured explicit sex in Holland and Germany, and violence in Scandinavia. In the Russian spin off of this reality show, contestants are locked in a portion of a hotel in Red Square, Moscow. Twenty-four hour cameras are not the only way to view housemates, as a one-way mirror onto the square enables passers-by to look directly into the house and the contestants. This reveals how reality shows are continually in search of a new way to attract viewers. In this particular programme format, individuals are told to be themselves, not given scripts and often encouraged to lose their inhibitions by the provision of alcohol. If what results is sex and violence, the issue as to whether this may not simply be pornography placed under an acceptable label arises. If such is the case, practitioners and viewers will have to discern why it may be acceptable to screen, in the light thereof that pornography is considered morally reprehensible by today's society.

In deliberating the future of reality-based talk shows, television psychologist Jamie Huysman has offered an alternative to the current format (Frostrup 2001). In order to address the charges of exploitation and assist guests in dealing with the emotional stress, Huysman proposes a programme named *Aftercare*. Viewers would be given the opportunity to follow a real life soap opera and thereafter the guests would receive treatment from a centre sponsored by the show. In so doing, the producers do not simply attempt to apply quick-fix therapy with the help of therapists, but have attempted an approach that is not simply about sensationalism and ratings. This would mean that media practitioners could feel that they have acted in a more ethical manner, however, the story would still be brought to the audience as entertainment. Huysman also states that the process would be clear for participants who would understand that they will have to discuss their problems on television, and subsequent thereto receive treatment to assist them in dealing with these problems. A positive aspect of this proposal is that where television appears to some as the only place left

40

to turn for help, these participants would indeed receive proper treatment even though their lives will be placed in the spotlight on television. However, it says very little for our society generally where the last port of call for the desperate is television. In addition, the community and other practitioners should ask themselves whether it is acceptable for some in the entertainment industry to take what they want from people, put them on stage and examine every aspect of their lives.

The short-term future of reality television appears successful, despite the drop in ratings in the United States. In many countries such as our own, the phenomenon of reality television is now only catching on, with local productions still in their initial stages. Also, even though shows such as the renowned *Survivor* have lost viewers after 11 September 2001, stations in the United States are currently still making new versions of various shows which means that reality programmes will be on screen there for at least the next season. It may indeed also be possible that there will be an upsurge in interest in reality shows after the American public has dealt with the tragedy.

Professor Fischoff of California State University is of the opinion "that public execution will be part of the TV fare of the future" (Frostrup 2001). He went on to state that as a result of the internet a substantial audience will be found to be viewing paedophilia, bestiality, blood sports or anything that may be an adrenalin rush to them. Fischoff argues that such is the world future in terms of entertainment and states that it is "going to be our worst nightmare" (Frostrup 2001). Due to the commercial nature of the current media industry, this may the way in which television viewing is headed. However, if media practitioners consider the moral values of their audience, make ethical decisions and reflect on their role in society, it should be possible to avoid such a situation.

41

13. Conclusion

It is a fact that reality television is popular with audiences and that for some reason individuals are curious to experience the heartache, pain, stress and uncertainty of others. People are inherently curious, but it seems as if television is now creating nations of voyeurs who want more and more outrageous scenes brought into their homes. Most reality shows are aimed at entertaining the viewer and this is indeed a legitimate function of the medium of television. However, media practitioners involved with reality television need to realise the impact that these shows may ultimately have on their audience.

The various forms of media and information that the public is exposed to have largely influenced the attitudes of individuals in modern society, especially as a result of the vicarious experiences people have through television. This means that the responsibility of media practitioners to ensure the dissemination of morally acceptable information is greater than before. It appears to have become a daunting task as a result of the kind of access the internet has created. There is a greater flow of information and the kind of material distributed is of a much more explicit nature. However, this does not mean that television media practitioners should now have free reign to broadcast what they please. Every society needs ethics as they help to form what is morally acceptable to that society and, as people have varying experiences, moral values cannot be determined by individual persons. People in society need to know that there is a line to be drawn and exactly where that line is, and the media industry can assist in educating people with regards to this. In addition, media practitioners are moral agents of society which means that they have the responsibility to uphold the moral climate of the society they serve. However, the problem lies therein that although they have this obligation, it becomes increasingly difficult for practitioners to carry this responsibility due to the economic pressures presented by modern society.

42

Television does to a large extent reflect the culture of a society and the ethical standards that are acceptable to it. Even though some content may be a reflection of a society's values, practitioners as role models may have the duty to attempt to increase the moral climate of their community. Reality television, it is argued, is in most cases not a reflection of current norms. Even though it is popular with millions of people, there are those who have objected and protested to this form of programming. It may be necessary for practitioners to take heed to this minority group, as they may indeed be indicating what the true state of morals in society is. It is a difficult determination for practitioners to make, however, when considering the impact that reality shows can have on the lives of individuals or the community as a whole, the media need to view this from an ethical perspective. This does not mean that censorship is being advocated, but rather that in entertainment television the distinction must be made between material that is newsworthy and content that is simply mindless, trivial entertainment. If it is the latter and the media are aware of great potential harm or danger that may be caused by the screening of the material, it may be in the interests of society not to screen that content. If media practitioners indeed try to improve the moral climate of their society they may find that commercial viability, as well as audience demands, may present great obstacles for them. It may be so that society as a whole will need to act in order to effect change, but role models such as media practitioners can assist in alerting society to the need for change and take the lead in bringing this about.

A positive result of reality-based programmes is that it has stirred public debate about, for example, the exploitation of the participants and the responsibilities of the media towards their viewers. The media industry needs to analyse their goals and function and act accordingly. It may be that the events of September 11 have caused self-analysis in the industry, however, this may also only be temporary. Viewers need to realise the crucial role they have to play in voicing their opinions on issues and showing practitioners what the various viewpoints in society are.

43

In reality television reality is inherently blurred as television makes that which individuals do everyday appear attractive and glamorous. Therein is probably where the greatest danger lies. Viewers watch reality shows and react to the behaviour of the contestants in various ways. Television has the potential to influence people's attitudes and where this may be a positive aspect of the medium, it may also be negative. Where viewers watch individuals day in and day out doing the same things they do every day the moral values of contestants may influence their own lives. Viewers identify with many of these contestants as often they are chosen to come from all walks of life. If the behaviour of that person is morally reprehensible, yet everyone on the show and otherwise accepts it, viewers may choose to simulate this behaviour as it may not seem like such a wrong act any longer. Also, contestants may become role models to viewers who then follow their lead. However, many times contestants in reality shows are subtly encouraged by producers to act in this way, in order to glue the audience. If the audience then views these normal people behaving in this way, with no one objecting, it may cause individuals to question their own moral values and in this way reality television may blur what the true moral standards of society are. What the morals of individuals should be may change because of this distorted picture, resulting in a society that has blurred its beliefs and values. This may cause the debasement of moral values in society in general, which most likely will also affect those of the media industry.

Reality television viewers are in search of entertainment and the media industry appears to have found a way to keep them occupied. The ethical challenges and responsibilities of the media industry are compounded almost daily by reality-based shows as has been investigated in this paper. However, those media practitioners producing reality shows do not seem to be aware of these questions. There are many ethical issues that they need to consider, but despite this they seem to be aloof of these challenges. Thus, it is the duty of other practitioners and viewers to focus the attention of reality show practitioners on these issues. If the television media industry continues as at present, the days of public executions in our living rooms may be

44

near, and then the reality of how reality television has impacted on society may be too much for practitioners and viewers to bear.

45

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