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The Dark Side of Reality TV: Professional Ethics and the Treatment of Reality Show Participants

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This article proposes an inventory of key ethical issues emerging from the production of reality TV shows, with a primary focus on participants' rights/interests and program makers' responsibilities. The analysis is structured according to four categories of potential harm (intrusion, humiliation, misrepresentation, and appropriation) and different stages of the production process, integrating theorizations on media, documentary, and image ethics with insights derived from 48 semistructured qualitative interviews with reality professionals and participants and several contracts. It is argued that professional practice needs to be informed by ethical considerations and accountability measures, touching a middle ground between incident-centered and all-encompassing critiques and between structural factors at industry and genre levels and (situational) measures of agency and differentiation.

Keywords: reality TV, professional ethics, hybridity, television production

To contend that reality TV is morally vexed would strike few as an overblown or, for that matter, groundbreaking assertion. The gradual proliferation in the past two decades of a hybrid kind of television programming premised on providing factual entertainment through the experiences and performances of nonprofessional actors, has invoked public concern over fundamental moral values such as (respect for) human dignity and integrity, honesty, and truth. Public debates tend to emerge, submerge, and reemerge, in a repetitive movement, around individual, more or less extreme "incidents" (which vary locally, yet Endemol's *Big Brother* seems to be a prototypical example). Conversely, critical discourses are shaped by the contours of a "moral panic" and derogatory notions that (pre)conceive reality TV as a monolithic "bad object"—as "trash," "voyeur," or "humiliation" television (see, e.g., Calvert, 2004; Hill, 2007; Mills, 2004). So the particularism of an "incident-centered ethics" (Evers, 2007), episodically focusing on (seemingly) individual lapses, stands against the all-encompassing scope of positions that illuminate broader contextual factors but tend to easily gloss over empirical nuances.

This article aims to strike a middle ground by developing a comprehensive yet differentiating inventory of ethical issues and considerations that emerge in the production of reality shows. The focus here is thus on a (professional) ethics *of* reality TV (cf. Poniewozik, 2012), sketching out potentially harmful implications with a particular sensitivity to participants' rights and interests and program makers' liabilities. I argue that the burden of responsibility on program makers to prevent harm to *participants* is

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more tangible and immediate than that which exists toward the *audience* (Nichols, 2008; Winston, 2000). Moreover, in (formatted) reality shows (Bondebjerg, 2002), the power differential between professionals and subjects extends beyond relative access to the means of representation (Nichols, 2008) to substantial measures of pro-filmic management.

The analysis is grounded in theorizations on documentary, media, and image ethics and, importantly, in the views and experiences of professionals and participants as well as a number of standard contracts of reality shows. The set includes original (Flemish/Northern Belgian) formats such as *The Mole* (a reality game show in which participants search for a saboteur in the group); *Ticket to the Tribes* (an "intercultural encounter" premised on the culture shock of Western families visiting "primitive" tribes; cf. *Worlds Apart*); *Exotic Love* and *Superfans* ("docu-serials" about multiethnic relationships and fan experiences); and local versions of *Temptation Island*, *Expedition Robinson* (survival shows similar to *Survivor*), *Supernanny* (a makeover show in which an expert offers parenting advice to "dysfunctional" families, similar to *Nanny 911*), *That'll Teach 'Em* (a historical reenactment in a boarding school/military academy setting featuring youngsters), *Oberon* (a game show in a medieval society reenactment setting), and *A Perfect Murder* (a "docufiction game show" in which participants compete to solve a fictitious murder, similar to *Murder in Small Town X*).

In total, 48 semistructured, in-depth interviews were conducted, including 14 professionals (mostly creative, such as producers and executive producers, creative directors, story editors, editors, director's assistants, and reporters) and 34 participants. Seven of the 34 participants held intermediary, relatively more privileged positions as experts or production associates (such as the "tempters" and "temptresses" on *Temptation Island*, the "traitor" on *The Mole*, and members of teacher corps on *That'll Teach 'Em*). All interviewees had been involved in formats with a border-crossing circulation, delivered by different production companies to public service and commercial stations, and spanning various subgenres, types of participants, and degrees of public controversy.

Interview transcripts were coded through a thematic content analysis approach using Atlas.ti software for qualitative data analysis. The findings discussed below pertain to themes that were consistently reiterated within (factions of) the interviewee sample and reached (data) saturation, although idiosyncratic positions are given due consideration. Interview citations were selected for their illustrative, expressive qualities.

Reality TV, Hybridization, and Disoriented Moral Compasses

Although it is difficult to provide a straightforward definition of reality TV, the literature (e.g., Andrejevic, 2008; Bondebjerg, 2002; Kilborn, 2003) puts forward a quite consistent, identifiable set of features and examples that carry ethical implications. Reality TV can be conceived as a strongly narrativized and dramatized portrayal of lived experiences (gazing upon and exposing private and intimate spheres) of nonprofessional actors (others "acting as themselves") in largely unscripted but managed and controlled situations (thus imbued with power relationships), premised on an "assertiveness" (Plantinga, 1997) embodied in a distinctive discursive claim to the real (thus referring to an actual state of affairs) and with a primary intent of delivering pleasure (instead of serving a social purpose). Andrejevic (2008)

argues that what sets reality formats apart from news media is their focus "on publicizing the private and intimate" and their emphasis "on therapy and social experimentation for the purpose of diversion" (para. 1).

Hybridization is a hallmark of reality TV (Bondebjerg, 2002), and it is precisely the coexistence of conventionally distinguished repertoires of information and popular entertainment, fact and fiction, or private and public that complicates ethical judgments. As Hill (2007) demonstrates in a large-scale reception study of reality TV, due to this ambiguity, the screen form "seems to lack a moral center by which viewers can check their own moral compass" (pp. 220–211). The entertainment framework and the absence of an institutional context comparable to journalism effectively hamper the resolution of typical dilemmas between moral and professional values, or personality rights and social responsibility, which emerge when representing others. It makes an engagement with the ethical treatment of reality show participants, therefore, all the more pertinent.

Mapping Reality TV Ethics: Preliminary Notes and Distinctions

This section describes the multifaceted nature of a professional ethics of reality TV, providing a basis and general framework for a discussion of key ethical issues (Figure 1).

Textual, Extratextual, Intertextual

Ethical issues are not entirely reducible to what occurs *in* and *through* a screened program. They also extend to, or wholly emerge from, what *lies behind* and what *comes with or after* distribution, promotion, and transmission, thus exhibiting extra- and intertextual dimensions. Clearly, this should not downplay the merit of looking closely into the *screened program* itself, which may serve as *physical* "evidence" of particular practices or as *depiction* of broader social categories (Carroll, 1996). Furthermore, ethical issues may pertain to the content or pro-filmic (*what*) and to the form (*how*) of the portrayal or, related, to the *origination* or *organization* of images and sounds (Corner, 2008).

Television production is essentially a standardized, multiphase, creative, technical, and managerial process involving different stakeholders and loyalties, situated within a larger political-economic and sociocultural context. Yet the production apparatus typically remains largely invisible to the typical viewer, and occasional self-conscious references are more likely part of a promotional strategy or a stylistic marker of distinction. This secrecy in itself feeds moral critique because it sustains the power differential and enables program makers to circumvent accountability (Calvert, 2004).

Stakeholders, Loyalties, and Autonomy

In (the moral fallout of) practitioners' day-to-day decision making, different stakeholders and competing loyalties figure. Ethical dilemmas emerge precisely from the calculation of (professional, commercial, moral) values and responsibilities, subscribing to one at the expense of others, whether on the basis of moral principles or not (Gross, Katz, & Ruby, 1988; Potter in Christians, Fackler, Rotzoll, & McKee, 1998).

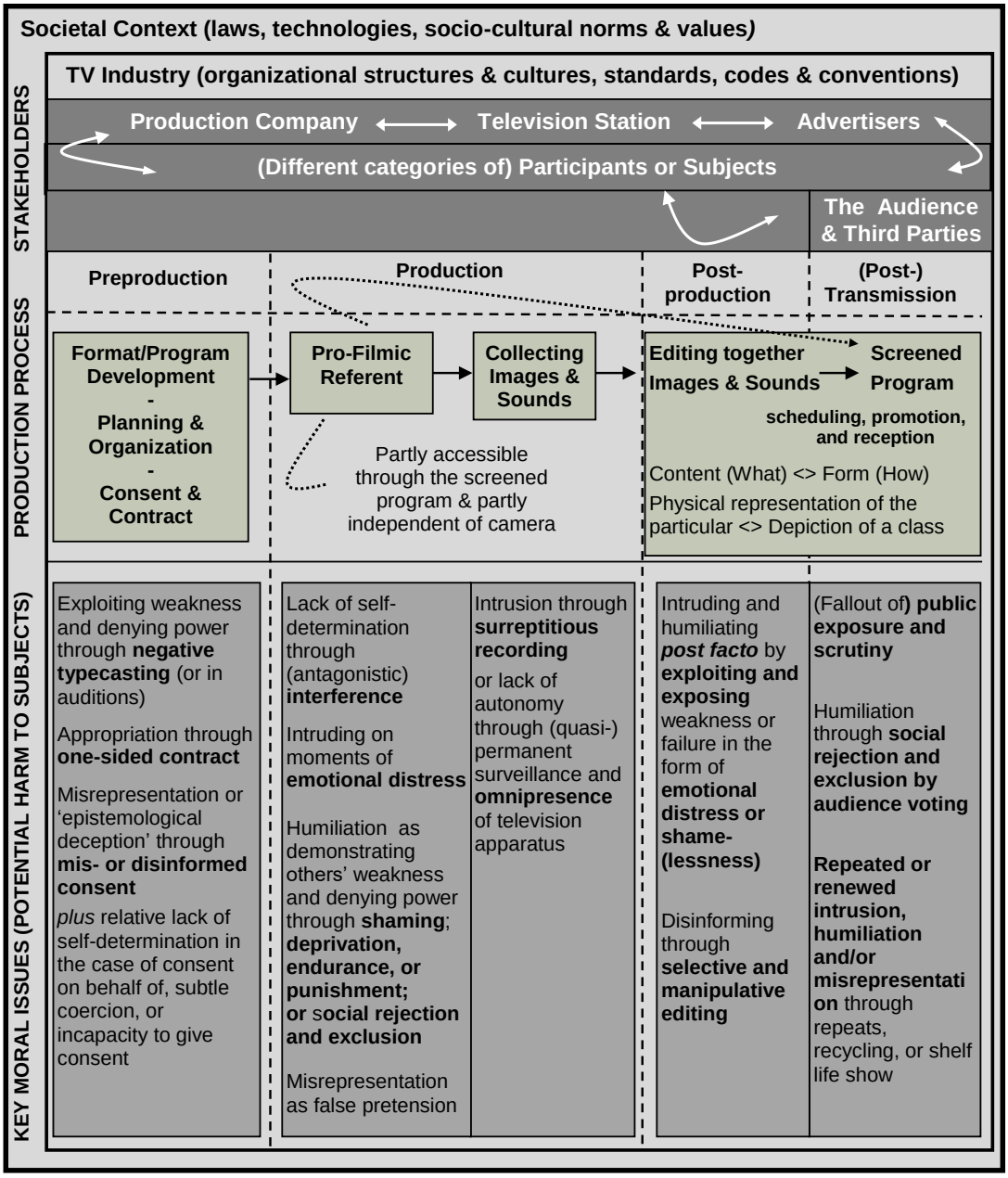

Figure 1. A schematic overview of meaningful distinctions and dimensions, stakeholders, and ethical issues in reality show production.

Broadly implied is the threefold interaction between the television institution (comprising network and station executives; managerial, creative, and technical staff; and sponsors and advertisers), the filmed subjects, and the audience (Aufderheide, Jaszi, & Chandra, 2009; Nichols, 2001, 2008). Particularly meaningful for an ethical analysis is to consider the multiple *roles* and associated *status* or *power* subjects may adopt, ranging from "ordinary people" to (crime) offender, victim, or witness, to celebrity, public figure, or expert, to third party (Bonner, 2003; Hibberd, Kilborn, McNair, Marriot, & Schlesinger, 2000). Likewise, the audience may refer to an amorphous collective entity (public interest/opinion) or to individuals.

As for *authorial autonomy and responsibility*, television production is not authorless but should be understood as a dialogic site (Sandeen & Compesi, 1990), where a hierarchy of creative and corresponding moral responsibilities applies. Individual moral values constantly interact, and possibly conflict, with the exigencies and regulations of television industry and market, measures of organizational standardization and aesthetic conventionalization, options provided by technological developments, and perceptions of the public opinion (Sandeen & Compesi, 1990).

(Un)Ethical Treatment of Reality Show Participants

This discussion of ethical issues relating to the treatment of participants within the "structured and managed setting" (Teurlings, 2001, p. 253) of reality show production broadly fits four (not mutually exclusive) categories that align with notions of intrusion, embarrassment, false light, and appropriation. These have been identified as key topics in media ethics scholarship and in privacy law (Christians et al., 1998; Gross et al., 1988), essentially entwined with fundamental moral values of (respect for) human dignity, integrity, and honesty (Christians & Cooper, 2009). Serving "as a map with which to survey the territory in which many issues of image ethics arise" (Gross et al., 1988, p. 8), I first define these concepts before elaborating them through interview data.

Intrusion

We understand privacy not as "a binary, all-or-nothing characteristic" (Calvert, 2004, p. 167) but, following Hodges (2009), in terms of measures of control a subject has over concentric circles of intimacy, including who has access to the innermost sphere (cf. "audience segmentation," Shufeldt Esch, 2012, p. 50). As such, intrusion is an infringement of someone's sense of self-determination, becoming a matter of *space* rather than *place* as it transcends the physical or material and pertains as well to a subject's inner world of ideas, feelings, and personal life generally—that is, to "emotional loss" (Shufeldt Esch, 2012, p. 47; see also Hodges, 2009).

The image of concentric circles of intimacy also suggests that (experiences of) intrusion should be thought of in *gradual* terms, and may vary depending on personal boundaries or, on a broader level, cultural or sociohistorical sensitivities. In this regard, it has become increasingly common in Western societies to publicly share information hitherto considered private—a trend effectively demonstrated by the proliferation of reality TV (Calvert, 2004; Van Zoonen, 2000).

Further, we subscribe to the idea that intrusion lies in the unwarranted seizure of others' most intimate circles *and/or* in the disclosure of such personal information (cf. Archard, 1998). A quite established principle, finally, states an appeal to privacy should be weighed against a subject's *status* or *persona* (Hodges, 2009; Kieran, 1997), which interacts with the public relevance or proportion of the information and with (social) power to reaffirm personal boundaries.

Humiliation

It is useful, first, to distinguish between *acts* and *feelings* of humiliation (Hartling & Luchetta, in Reysles, 2007). *Acts* of humiliation broadly consist of performing actions or creating conditions that lower a person's or group's dignity or self-esteem, with the perpetrator often deriving a sense of self-satisfaction from it by feeling *above* the other. *Feelings* of humiliation refer to negative emotions, distress, or pain that one experiences when "being, or perceiving oneself as being, unjustly degraded, ridiculed, or put down—in particular, one's identity has been demeaned or devalued" (Hartling & Luchetta, in Reysles, 2007, p. 409). An assessment of humiliation needs to ascertain human (speech) *acts* that happen in and through a screened program and beyond, regardless of whether feelings of humiliation occur.

Further, humiliation is deeply *interactional*, which does not necessarily imply actual public exposure or an audience (Reysles, 2007; Schick, 1997). It could also be conceived as an act of *disempowerment*, enforced by a more powerful inflictor who effectively (ab)uses and/or demonstrates the power differential by depriving or denying others certain privileges or options or by exposing their weakness (Reysles, 2007; Schick, 1997).

Misrepresentation

Misrepresentation is defined here broadly as any communicative act that *deceives* or (re)presents a particular state of affairs unfaithfully or misleadingly. The focus is thus on "epistemological deception," which relates to "matters of knowledge, including information and matters of fact" (Spence, 2012, p. 127). This issue is essentially entwined with the ethical standard of truth, which is "central to communication practice . . . an unwavering imperative" (Christians & Cooper, 2009, p. 62) and determines the quality of public discourse (Plantinga, 1997).

Like any form of discourse, reality shows do not reflect but actively shape the reality that is represented, informed by the structures of television (narrative) and professional values of "good (reality) television." As character development and story events emanate from real-life personae and occurrences, though, creative decisions carry a distinctive moral weight (Pryluck, 2005), which leads to a tenuous balancing act between assertiveness and (extended) measures of artistic license.

Equally relevant in the context of the reality aesthetic, which demands participants to be (or appear to be) unpremeditated and unsuspecting (which is increasingly difficult to attain as the genre matures), misrepresentation may also relate to not fully informing candidates about format and production process. Here, it is useful to distinguish, as Spence argues (2012), between disinformation and misinformation, based on whether the deception is intentional. Although this points at measures of

degree, both forms may be considered unethical in the (a priori) sense of being untruthful or by having potentially harmful consequences.

Appropriation

Finally, appropriation is distinguished from the other areas in the sense that "the interest protected is not so much a mental as a proprietary one" (Prosser, in Gross et al., 1988, p. 13). It commonly refers to "the use of a person's name, picture, or likeness without that person's permission, usually for commercial exploitation" (Day, 2006, p. 136), and is thus closely linked to the "right to publicity," which is an alienable property right protecting one's public persona (Halbert, 2003). While candidates typically (need to) sign away this legal protection, ethical questions emerge specifically from reality shows' hybridity as character or screen performance and an actor's real-life persona essentially coincide. The contract thus extends broadcasters' control over the ownership of a person's public persona, which could be seen as part of a larger scheme of exploitation in reality show production based on the un(der)paid labor of (social) actors and commodification of their personae and experiences (Halbert, 2003).

Key Ethical Issues From Preproduction to Post-Transmission

Preproduction

Moral questions may also, or even primarily, pertain to preproduction, where formats are developed, prepared, and anticipated; candidates are solicited and auditioned; and consent is obtained and contracts signed. Clearly, the implications of contract and consent exceed preproduction because they are both constituent and constitutive of the power relationship between program makers and participants that structures reality show production, and they circumscribe the resolution of ethical dilemmas that emerge from it.

Negative (Type)casting

From an ethical perspective, questions arise when the selection of particular character types primarily anticipates (dramatic) pleasures derived from gloating at the perceived weakness, inferiority, or failure of others (cf. "humiliation"). That is, when "otherness" is exploited for entertainment purposes, perpetuating the social or cultural devaluation of particular groups in society. Closely related, then, is the issue of stereotyping others through preconceived, normative images that are not, or are only partially, grounded in factual truth (cf. "epistemological deception"; see, e.g., Cooke-Jackson & Hansen, 2008; Kuppens & Mast, 2012; Van den Bulck, Claessens, Mast, & Kuppens, 2015). Because broader societal inequalities in terms of social capital, media literacy, and (access to other) resources may skew the pool of candidates for particular reality shows (Grindstaff, 2006), this both points at the structural dimension of the issue while leaving some room for unintentionality on the part of reality program makers (which does not mitigate potential harmful consequences, though). A producer of a parenting advice program (I29), for instance, responds to accusations of class bias by referring to unsuccessful attempts at widening the scope of participants, in the process underscoring the role of social status:

> They [the middle classes] are more reluctant when it comes to privacy. . . . It's the same with celebrities. They are valuable to the station, so we are not going to air their dirty laundry. Of course we try to avoid this with others as well, but they are somewhat more permissive in this regard.

One-Sided Contract

The contract that candidates need to sign as a precondition for participation is "the unviewed framework that allows 'reality' television to work," signifying the power of production companies and television stations and enabling them to control "both the realities portrayed on television and the lived experience of the show's participants" (Halbert, 2003, p. 51) by granting substantial creative license and legal protection.

The content of three versions of a standardized reality TV contract administered by a commercial television station was quite similar to that of the contracts discussed by Shufeldt and Gale (2007; *Trading Spaces*, TLC) and Halbert (2003; *Survivor*, CBS), which points at the wider relevance and structural nature of the stipulations. The contract starts with an identification of the production company and television station, followed by an outline of format and program concept. Tellingly, the openness of this introductory section is immediately qualified, and effectively rendered meaningless, by an article stating that the broadcaster retains the right "to make adjustments to the Format and the Program" and, correspondingly, "to unilaterally change the rules, preconditions, etc. (within acceptable limits) Participants are subject to." Clearly, this aligns with the authorial freedom program makers accord themselves by having candidates forfeit their right to rebuke "changes, abbreviations and/or additions to his/her contribution" and effectively sign away their rights to privacy and to publicity. The latter extends to the merchandising of one's name, (auto)biography, stories, or images, which is "final, irrevocable, and applies worldwide and without any temporal restriction, and for all known means of exploitation."

Furthermore, candidates formally commit themselves to fully cooperate, and not to withdraw at any time under penalty of a fine, as well as to contribute to the active promotion of the show before, during, and after transmission. In a similar vein, there is a section on confidentiality that proscribes participants to disclose any ("inside") information directly or indirectly related to (the production of) the show, including the terms of the contract, which applies for a period of 10 years. So, apart from a smaller section on "remunerations and reimbursements," the contract shies away from specifying any duties or liabilities on the part of program makers while binding participants irrevocably to a far-reaching engagement.

In summary, the contract grants program makers "broad rights to utilize participants' images and life stories (or to willfully misrepresent them) for promotional purposes and narrative effect" (Shufeldt & Gale, 2007, p. 266). Or, as a participant of *Expedition Robinson* (I7) states: "At the end of the day, with that sheet of paper . . . you're putting your life in their hands." What is more, participants may sign this agreement on the basis of insufficient or misleading information.

Mis- and Disinformed Consent

Questions of misrepresentation may indeed concern the extent to which candidates are informed, prior to giving consent, about the format, their contributions, and possible consequences (Hibberd et al., 2000). Surely, commonsensical limits apply to the effective implementation of the principle of informed consent in day-to-day television production. It is reasonable, for instance, to argue that program makers cannot anticipate every possible development or impact of the production, just as reality participants are not necessarily media savvy or well versed into the "process of mediation" simply by watching the "result of mediation" (Grindstaff, 2006, p. 128). The latter is significant for it questions a defensive discourse common among program makers, articulated by a reporter (I33) as follows: "I think a lot of people nowadays know how a TV show works and know what's about to happen. 'Reality' as such is not new, they're watching it every day." It also connects with forms of misinformation that occur because television professionals (inadvertently) prove unable to look beyond taken-for-granted routines and practices. However, program makers may also purposely withhold or distort vital pieces of information, whether in the interest of obtaining consent—by concealing or downplaying aspects that could potentially dissuade participants—or led by the demands of the reality TV aesthetic, which typically values the unpremeditated and unguarded. An editor (I27) asserts:

> You can only warn them they will be recognized everywhere they come, and that if things go wrong, they may be laughed at. But, well, you don't want to cry this out loud either, do you, because it's just that unknowing attitude you want.

Finally, formats may incorporate a deceptive scheme as a catalyst for unfolding (story) events, as in the case of reality shows premised on a particular twist and its eventual reveal. Disclosure of the true nature of the setup to participants post facto is indispensable from a moral point of view, and may be a mitigating factor if consent is also renegotiated (see Nichols, 2001, 2008).

Production

Production is the stage where images and sounds originate, with ethical questions emerging from pro-filmic actions and conditions (on/off screen) and filmic parameters. The issues in this category mainly fall within the areas of intrusion and humiliation, and both occur in front of and through the camera.

Surreptitious Recording

The surreptitious use of (miniature) camera and/or sound recording devices typically proceeds with no relation between the subject and object of gaze being established prior to the filming (or at all), or on the basis of a false pretense (cf. misrepresentation). Strongly condemning such covert practices, interviewees uphold a subject's self-determination as an unwavering moral principle, and even more so when innermost spheres of privacy (often articulated in terms of the sexual or the naked body) are concerned (which relates to the nature, public/private setting, and spatial-temporal scale of the format). Therefore, alerting candidates to the overall surveillance scheme and the presence of covert recording devices *prior to* filming, when consent is obtained, or else giving filmed subjects a veto right before public

disclosure of surreptitious recordings are considered mitigating factors that effectively reinstate a subject's right to self-determination. However, when an unsuspecting subject engages in some kind of "immoral" behavior, interviewees argue, the right to privacy is overruled by a concern with (social) justice or honesty, as in the case of exposing unfaithful behavior in *Temptation Island*:

> The premise is cheating. . . . So what happens? People will try to do it secretly. . . . So, I believe, if they're not honest about it . . . then I think it's okay. And you could argue that it's unethical. Well, then I think you shouldn't have signed up for it. (I7, participant in *Expedition Robinson*)

Surveillance and Omnipresence

> You try to anticipate what it will feel like to have a camera around at all times, yet sometimes it really bothers you. When you just can't stand them anymore. But you have to. You realize that you've committed yourself, you've signed the contract.

As this quote from a participant of *Ticket to the Tribes* (I24) demonstrates, sacrificing some degree of autonomy comes with the territory of participation. However, differences of kind and degree apply in terms of the extent to which a format rationale entails surveillance, confinement, or isolation from the outside world and the more or less encompassing nature, scale, and time frame of the production apparatus. To what degree reality show participants are "being consumed by" the production setting relates meaningfully to both technical and creative dimensions, to what available resources permit, and to what the format or story requires. A producer (I29), referring to the issue of omnipresence, interestingly evokes the recurrent theme of balancing the professional values of creating good story and enhancing reality values with moral values.

> I think it's very exhausting. The more the camera is around, the less you're going to be aware of it, which is good for the "reality" aspect, but I think it's not healthy. You have to give these people some space, for sure.

Filming in Good Times and Bad Times

Related to the topic of surveillance and omnipresence is the intrusiveness of the camera (crew) at moments of distress, where program makers encounter a dilemma between professional values of detachment and narrative interest versus empathizing care. Intense emotional experiences are key to the dramatic appeal of performances in reality shows, and therefore they are also variously anticipated. This is evident in the standard contracts I obtained, where individual articles state that "the Contestant fully commits him/herself and agrees to never refuse to respond to any question about his/her participation in the Program, whatever his/her state of mind at the moment of questioning," or "unconditionally grants his/her permission to be filmed and interviewed throughout." The extent to which formats thrive on the vivid display of personal distress at the expense of empathizing care differs, however, as a producer (I28) explains:

> Because there're so many different layers to [our] show, you don't depend on this. It's not like "How far can I push you?" . . . Now you go like, "Oh, s/he's having a hard time, let's get the psychologist," and, "Come, let's have a talk." While otherwise, you would say: "This is interesting, she's breaking down." Which might be good television! Well, television people like to watch.

What possibly aggravates the issue is when reality program makers purposely intervene—"divide and record"—despite the proclaimed unscripted qualities, to induce negative emotions through (*openly*) or beyond (*covertly*) format rituals such as games or evictions, interviews, and video diaries (see also Mast, 2016).

Demonstrating Others' Weakness Through Shaming

Shame entails a negative judgment of the self for failing personal or social demands (Reysles, 2007). As such, it presupposes adherence to norms and values shared by the broader community while also relating to self-respect, defined as "the attitude of seeking to keep one's conduct in line with some ideal standard" (Quinton, 1997, p. 78). Some reality shows thrive on exploiting and gloating at others' (sense of) failure (*Schadenfreude*; see Frey, 2010), their shame or (apparent) shamelessness—for instance, in the form of "'excessive' emotional and bodily displays" (Grindstaff, 2006), disclosure of matters typically considered private or taboo—"airing one's dirty laundry on television" (p. 117), or the "'rejection' banter" (Quail, 2009, para. 5) of a bully-type presenter or expert.

In this regard, reality TV has been described as a "spectacle of shame" (Palmer, 2006), which increasingly stretches boundaries of shame, thriving on the shamelessness of what is (somewhat derogatorily) described as "willing victims" who "knowingly" take shame upon themselves (Palmer, 2006). Or, as a production member (I6) of *Temptation Island* puts it: "Inevitably you'll lose some dignity. Inevitably. But if you don't have any dignity in the first place, well."

Yet it could be argued that portraying social others who do not conform to shared standards of normalcy or appropriateness is not unethical per se, but becomes so when it serves to stigmatize or ridicule the vulnerable, perpetuating social inequalities in the process (Grindstaff, 2006). It is hardly possible, therefore, to isolate the issue from editorial decisions made in casting (supra) and in editing (infra). That this is a delicate balancing act, however, is demonstrated by this quote from a production member of *Superfans* (I36) (see also Van den Bulck et al., 2015):

> What I find interesting about "human interest TV" is that it shows how people may be different. Yet this is not always appreciated. . . . Of course we show the biggest fans, whose fan experience is quite extreme, but we don't judge them. Viewers surely do, though. . . . Society expects you to be politically correct and conform. While I believe that the people we film don't need to be ashamed of themselves.

Deprivation, Endurance, and Punishment

Humiliation as *an act of disempowerment* also materializes in individual reality shows through quite direct manifestations of *depriving* others of basic human needs and liberties and *imposing* particular *burden*s. As a participant in *Expedition Robinson* (I6) testifies: "You have no sense of self-esteem left anymore, you really don't, you feel worthless. . . . It's incredible, you're nothing, you're totally degraded, they treat you like a dog . . . , and, well, you just don't feel human anymore." Most notable in this regard are formats that balance social experimental features such as what-if simulations and preplanned surveillance against those of "plays" (Dovey, 2004). Techniques of destabilizing the normalcy of people's everyday lives and manipulating social behavior may serve here, to varying degrees and in different configurations, as catalysts of intense human behavior and emotions.

Furthermore, such formats occupy "liminal spaces" that suspend the laws governing "real life" and are delimited in time and space (Caillois, 1958/2001). In games, "rules are imperative and absolute, beyond discussion," since renouncing them would "ruin" (Caillois, 1958/2001, p. 7) the game and render it meaningless. In reality game shows, compliance is enforced through repressive or more gentle penalizing systems, which also operate beyond the game world in the form of (legal) sanctions imposed by the contract—including fines and removal. Typically, however, techniques of corporeal punishment, physical or mental endurance, incarceration, or the giving and taking of privileges pass, hiding behind the ostensibly more "friendly face" of television entertainment. A member of the teacher corps (I17) in *That'll Teach 'Em* evokes the disorienting dynamic of the reality show's hybrid, liminal character:

> If they would ask me for a movie about the 1950s, to play a teacher who uses unacceptable punishments and is inhuman and so on, then I would, because it would be clear that it's fiction. But in this case, I wouldn't because it isn't clear for the viewer to what extent it's a fiction or not. . . . Some decisions went too far for me. The program didn't always show but sometimes pupils were damaged somehow or humiliated.

The benign qualities typically associated with play, therefore, do not unequivocally extend to the various sorts of privations and endurances imposed on reality participants.

What is more, in a profound critique of the reality game show, Brenton and Cohen (2003) contend that

> awareness of playing a role does not occlude the possibility of ones' actions and feelings within that role being as authentic as any other; the game is not removed from life, for its duration it *is* life, both a pretend world and the real world. (p. 161)

This point resonates (almost literally) throughout the interviews for this study and is also touched upon in the quotes above as well as in following reflection of a participant of *Expedition Robinson* (I8) on a challenge where contestants were encaged and had to outlast one another to stay in the game:

> Afterwards [my husband] said, "C'mon, that's really cruel, you don't even treat scum like that, you wouldn't even do this to an animal." And we didn't see it that way. We were in the game and we just wanted to stay in for as long as possible. . . . But at the time you're so absorbed by the game that you put up with it . . . that you actually don't pause for a moment.

Moreover, the exertion of power in these all-encompassing game worlds is to no small extent enabled and "naturalized" by rendering participants as "docile bodies" (Foucault, 1979) through the induction of (nearly) total immersion and internalization and omnipresent surveillance. In subtly subduing the potential for resistance, such processes operate rather surreptitiously along coercive powers administered by the restrictive terms of the contract. This observation is also relevant in light of the aforementioned argument that an absence of *feelings* of humiliation does not necessarily vindicate reality program makers.

"The Tribe Has Spoken": Reality Shows and Social Exclusion

Reality game shows with a (prolonged) competitive scheme including a nomination and/or eviction ritual may bring out the unsociable side of contests by promoting expedience and rivalry over camaraderie or community. Most interesting from an ethical point of view is the extent to which elements of public scrutiny and social rejection, by peers or "the popular vote," versus actual game performance—personal merit or fate (Caillois, 1958/2001)—determine the elimination rationale. For what is at stake in formats that proceed on a nomination/eviction ritual based on disapproval voting—"the money shot built around exclusion" (Mills, 2004, p. 80)—is the basic human need for self-esteem and social belongingness or acceptance (Maslow, 1954). Or, as a creative director (I1) relates, "Voting others off is the hardest part because it's psychologically tough. It's not just 'I lost a game,' but 'Of all the people who are left, I'm the least liked.'" Therefore, in devising a particular elimination rationale, *moral* values and *professional*—creative and/or commercial—considerations (e.g., drama, lucrative audience interactivity) interact and possibly conflict. Awareness, or actual experience, of the issue leads interviewees to either positions of (self-)criticism and negotiation of elimination logics or, conversely, fatalistic or permissive "it's the name of the game" discourses shifting responsibility entirely to contestants.

The producer of a game format delivered to a public-service broadcasting channel (I32) describes how a more considerate approach to the elimination component is perceived as a marker of distinction:

> This is a show where you proceed on the basis of your skills. So you're not kicked out by a group of people, you don't scapegoat. . . . And I think . . . that's what we're most proud of. That we're making a show that remains a game and doesn't intend to hurt people.

Postproduction

Postproduction constitutes a decisive, post facto creative stage, where images and sounds that originated during production or elsewhere are organized, or edited together, with "various kinds of

narrative or expositional continuity" (Corner, 2008, p. 23), accompanied by (nondiegetic) speech (voice-over commentary), sound effects, and music. As such, it offers producers ultimate control to construct narrative discourses and persona that fit a "preferred reality" scheme and exhibit entertainment values (Mast, 2016; Shufeldt & Gale, 2007; Teurlings, 2001).

Exploiting Emotional Distress or Shame(lessness)

From an ethical point of view, this creative license post facto is problematic when editorial cutting, structuring, and emphasizing serves to construct a "gloating voice," which may interact with decisions at the preceding stages (cf. negative typecasting and/or format rituals) or be a primary factor in exploiting others' weaknesses.

Disinforming Through Selective Editing

A focus on postproduction is also insightful in drawing attention to the need to distinguish between the veracity of images and sounds as reproductions of particular pro-filmic (speech) acts ("origination") and the (un)faithfulness of their discursive "organization" (Corner, 2008). As an editor (I27) notes, "You can make someone look sympathetic, or like a big asshole. It's very simple. So you have the power to determine who's sympathetic and who's not. That tells a lot about how it works, doesn't it." Questionable practices of "epistemological deception" are the construction of "composite events" from originally separate occurrences, spatial-temporal manipulations falsely interrelating events (causally), and/or deliberate omissions of meaningful context. Clearly, discursive distortion in reality shows is not only evident at the *physical* level, but also pertains to *depictions* of broader social categories (cf. stereotyping).

Looked at from a different angle, (selective) editing also enables program makers to conceal the production apparatus as well as potential "moments of resistance," which could undermine "preferred discourses." By the same token, program makers' control over the means of representation (Nichols, 2008) may also be deployed more positively, precisely to prevent any potential (additional) harm from public exposure. Such consideration may be part of a profound ethical awareness, yet, at the same time, it tends to work as a defensive strategy, legitimizing selective choices in relation to "what could have been." As a producer (I29) argues:

> Many won't agree with me and will say "No, they're not treated respectfully, because, is it really necessary to show these people's problems on television?" But if you would see the footage we have, and what we make out of it, then they're definitely treated with respect.

Post-Transmission

Finally, post-transmission adds the dimensions of publicity, which comes with the territory of broadcast media participation, and a reality show's afterlife.

Public Exposure

The element of public disclosure and scrutiny typically magnifies transgressions that preexist the moment of broadcasting, yet may also (be considered to) constitute the issue, as with some positions on surreptitious recording (intrusion), or social exclusion through audience voting (humiliation). The magnitude of the exposure will typically interact with measures of intrusion, humiliation, and/or misrepresentation at preceding stages and, in a consequence-based approach, with the relative visibility of a reality show and potential benefits of publicity for portrayed subjects.

Furthermore, from promotion to reception, a reality show does not operate in isolation but acquires meaning as the point of convergence in a complex web of interrelated texts. So the aspect of public exposure and scrutiny extends beyond the program as such and, with the advent of social media, in ever less controllable directions. A producer (I30) points at the shared responsibility of other media, such as popular television magazines, in treating reality show participants respectfully. However, as if responding, a teenage participant of a historical reality series (I9) refocalizes the question of responsibility on reality program makers.

> They're always criticizing reality programs, but . . . I've the impression that they're less ethical than television. Television may be bolder because it has more impact, but with magazines it's written in ink. And these are around for a week or a month or so, a television show lasts only an hour.

> They should have told us there would be online forums where people would scorn us. I've read some of these, and then I thought, "C'mon, we're like seventeen." And then they said, "Just ignore it, it will all pass." But they do so *afterwards*, so I think, "Well, if you know such things happen, why don't you keep this in mind when editing the show?

Prolonged Consent

A final issue is the longevity (shelf life) of a show, whether in the form of repeats or the recycling of individual fragments in a renewed context, which may also pose problems of misrepresentation (supra). The moral ramifications of repeated displays of harmful representations urges a reconsideration of the prolonged duration of consent, always granted at a certain moment in a subject's life, and, still more relevant, on one's behalf in the case of minors and children. As the executive producer of a parenting advice format (I35) relates:

> I think we've kept in touch with all of them. Except when they divorced after the show. Because you don't know how their lives will evolve afterwards. So they are going through hard times, clearly, and then [the station] repeats the episode, two years later or so. But there's nothing you can do about it, the contract states that the show may be repeated for eternity. But at the time you don't think about it.

Because the contract (supra) stipulates that the transfer of a participant's publicity rights to the broadcasting corporation is "irrevocable" and "infinite," key moral questions to be resolved are how far in time a prior permission should extend and what qualifications might apply, regardless of legal commitments.

Conclusion

This final section turns to a discussion of some broader implications of the proposed inventory of ethical issues regarding the treatment of reality show participants. Surely, as Pryluck (2005) notes, a "discussion of ethical issues will not by itself solve the problems" (p. 207). However, it may certainly contribute to the development of a more responsible and accountable profession by stimulating a "moral pause" (Gross et al., 1988) and by yielding theoretical and empirical insights needed for the elaboration of an ethical framework for reality show production.

The case presented here for a profound ethical (self-)critique of reality shows is particularly relevant in light of the *structural* dimension of the problematic. There is the broader context of well-documented (see, e.g., Aufderheide et al., 2009; Kilborn, 2003) developments in the political economy of contemporary television, which impose distinct market-oriented imperatives and associated commercial values while curtailing the checks and balances through deregulation and fragmentation of the production process. More specific to reality TV, the hybrid nature and (relative) lack of an institutional framework comparable to journalism complicate ethical judgment—"disorients our moral compasses." Significantly, the reality TV aesthetic and the power differential between program makers and participants encapsulated in and sanctioned by the contract produce a context for issues of intrusion, humiliation, misrepresentation, and appropriation to emerge, while acts of resistance are contained by repressive (e.g., terms of the contract) or more subtle (e.g., total absorption) strategies. The aesthetic also works against a conscientious adherence to the principle of *informed* consent, which further questions a purely legalistic, contractual approach to prior consent and its deployment as an ultimate ethical touchstone in "consent defense" discourses (Winston, 2000).

Against the background of these structural features, the reality show emerges, then, as part of an "exploitative system" (see Wyatt, 2012), where un(der)paid nonprofessional actors, their personae, reputations, and experiences, are commodified. So it could be argued from a utilitarian perspective that the reality show's troubled ethical status ensues from the harmful consequences of its premises, which cannot be justified by invoking a greater social good given the primacy of commercial and entertainment values. By the same token, taking a Kantian-inspired, duty-based view, the reality show is fundamentally problematic because it violates basic human values such as (respect for) integrity, dignity, and truth and does not act on principles that could become universal law. Moreover, in so doing, it treats humans as mere means to an end—in this case, commercial success in a competitive media environment—not as ends in themselves.

Yet, as argued, we need to allow room for *differentiation* (in kind and degree), for measures of *agency* within the structures and strictures of the production context outlined above. Or, as Poniewozik (2012, pp. ix–x) rightly points out, "to discuss the ethics of reality TV as a yes-or-no, black-and-white

question is the most common way of treating the issue, and the least useful." An ethical assessment of the reality show is, therefore, most productive when it does not remain at the level of the genre but zooms in on individual formats and (seasons of) shows (Wyatt & Bunton, 2012). As demonstrated, we need to ascertain *to what extent* formats or shows thrive on measures of intrusion, humiliation, misrepresentation, and appropriation, as evident in and through the actions of program makers. In this evaluation, some notion of potential benefits for participants or society at large and a participant's status, both generational and social, should be taken into account, with special care taken to protect the most vulnerable, including minorities, those who are mentally impaired, and children.

This provides the basis for the development of a situational ethics that adheres to fundamental moral values of integrity and honesty and principles not to harm others, nor to treat others merely as a means to an end; it also allows for contextual factors, measures of agency, and consequences. So program makers have a duty to inform and prepare candidates to the best of their ability about the format, participation, and possible implications and, correspondingly, to respect a person's right to self-determination. Given commonsensical limitations to informed consent, this notion should never be understood as a free-for-all and should be a basis, not an end point, for ethical treatment.

From this perspective, then, practices such as surreptitious recording, deceptive schemes, and "consent on behalf of" are particularly troublesome, urging program makers to give subjects the opportunity to reaffirm their boundaries of privacy at some point prior to disclosure. Likewise, relative measures of intimacy and the autonomy or space left to participants may be taken as markers of an ethical approach, although these will interact with personal and cultural sensitivities. Opening up the private sphere is, therefore, not unethical per se, and some loss of privacy may be outweighed by the empowering potential of interrogating social taboos, stereotypes, or restrictive ideologies (Shufeldt Esch, 2012; Van Zoonen, 2000).

Such latitudes of agency and consequence are less evident in the case of humiliation, which is harmful in and of itself, disempowers, and tends to reinforce social inequalities. Although it may be argued, still, to take individual feelings, rather than acts, of humiliation as a touchstone, I contend that this can be a mitigating factor at best given the normalizing power of broader societal processes of naturalization and strategies of total immersion. Nonetheless, degrees of shaming, deprivation, or burdening will depend on the interaction of editorial decisions concerning casting, format, and editing and on the scale and duration of the scheme. In this regard, social exclusion can be attenuated through an elimination rationale on the basis of merit or chance (cf. *The Mole*) and, in terms of scale, through rejection by co-contestants instead of the audience.

Indeed, public exposure is a particularly consequential facet of any reality show participation—one that program makers can and should be conscious of. Postproduction offers opportunities for a caring approach post facto—for instance, through sensitive editing, previews, or even veto rights (as deployed in the case of *Supernanny*). By the same taken, though, it lends power to control discourses and identities and to misrepresent. Creative license in reality shows should not extend to stating or implying things that one knows are false in the interest of story development or dramatic impact, regardless of the consequences. On a final note, principles of empathizing care for others and not treating others merely as

a means to an end need to extend beyond transmission to the afterlife of participation; they should also pertain to the ownership of one's public persona (certainly if material benefits are to figure in ethical calculations).

Television production is a site of collective *and* individual decision making, and with (greater) creative authority comes (greater) moral responsibility. This is a double-edged sword, though, because it allows for both "deep" and "shallow" ethical positions (Curry, in Hill, 2007) to exist. Or, as a creative director (I1) states, "I know I can trust myself, that they are in good hands with me. But I also know that there are some who hold another morality." It is pivotal, therefore, to bring ethical considerations more squarely into day-to-day calculations of reality show production through the development of "moral accountability systems" (Bertrand, 2000). This could materialize in a professional deontology inscribed in a code of conduct (e.g., effectively adopted in Flanders/Northern Belgium as of 2012) tailored to the hybridity of reality TV by integrating entertainment (cf. Good & Borden, 2010), journalism, and documentary ethics. The installment of ombudsmen or ethics committees within the industry, in combination with continuous professional training, could enhance the effectiveness of such moral guidelines. A more sincere, less self-celebratory reflexivity would be commendable as well. Not only would this advance ideas of *informed* consent and shared responsibility, but combined with media education it could further develop the media literacy of audiences—from which reality participants emerge.

The question remains whether the dilemma between commercial and ethical values can be resolved—that is, whether an entertaining, profitable show can be ethical (and vice versa). As this discussion of differentiation suggests, it is too totalizing to consider reality shows as a monolithic programming category or to simply equate good entertainment with intrusiveness, humiliation, or misrepresentation. Besides inspiring examples of good practice that succeed in appealing to a wide audience, the marketplace has also proven to be a regulating force with negative audience feedback leading production companies and television stations to withdraw controversial program concepts (Cooke-Jackson & Hansen, 2008; Vanacker, 2012). Indeed, there is a distinctive role reserved for audiences in holding media accountable, whether with "[their] remote control" (Calvert, 2004, p. 239), as consumers in the media marketplace, or as citizens participating in public dialogue. In this overall project, the importance of critical and empirical scholarship taking (the ethical treatment of participants in) reality TV seriously could not be overestimated.

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