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Technological Recursivity and the Contested Subject on Reality TV

Abstract

In after show interviews, reality television stars often cite the camera and producorial manipulation, like editing, when trying to explain away their conceivably indefensible behavior. And much academic criticism of reality shows hinges on these very same "negative" features of the format: technological mediation, truthiness, their "lack" of reality. However, given the pervasiveness of 21st Century digital communication technology, and our decades worth of exposure to the regulating gaze of CCTV cameras, this rhetorical position is increasingly losing merit, despite its continued deployment—at the start of 2013, A&E's Storage Wars was met by denouncements of a similar flavor. This paper attempts to draw on technology's current place in the cultural milieu to challenge, at the very least, the theoretical position that might find reality TV external to our lived reality. Some specific reality TV personalities, ones who have denounced or commented on their on-screen selves, are examined in order to open up a conversation worried less about the contrivance of reality TV and more about the contrivance of contemporary living. MTV's Jersey Shore, Teen Mom, The Hills, and ABC's The Bachelor are some of the televisual texts sampled for the content of this paper.

Keywords: technology, television, MTV, reality TV, CCTV, Snooki, Teen Mom, Jake Pavelka, Facebook, H8R, Big Brother, Jersey Shore

Two stars of MTV's reality show Teen Mom 2, Chelsea Houska and Kailyn Lowry, sat down with George Stephanopoulos on December 6, 2011 for an interview regarding the upcoming second season of their show. They were accompanied by Amy Kramer, a representative from the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, whose easy-bake assertions situated Teen

Mom 2 in a firmly preventative context. Houska and Lowry were queried by Stephanopoulos about their experiences being on the show, being filmed, and the result of their subsequent publicity. These two young women are, in fact, reality stars in the purest sense of the term, as critic Deborah Jermyn succinctly puts it, “everyday and ‘ordinary’ people transformed by circumstance and media attention into the ‘extraordinary’” (74). This is not Anna Nicole Smith, not Paris Hilton, and the naturally talented or otherwise extraordinary need not apply; these reality stars are “ordinary” people—granted, a negotiable term—who, under any other circumstance, would not achieve the same level of recognition. And Houska and Lowry’s responses to Stephanopoulos were in keeping with that line of thought. They truly seemed to be trying to live ordinary lives merely accentuated by the presence of high definition cameras; the camera operators work a grueling schedule just to get that one great scene: the bleakly telling fight with a boyfriend, the 3 AM feeding where everyone involved is crying, those anxious trips to family court and the pediatrician.

Houska and Lowry did not revel in their national publicity nor their status as MTV reality stars. Kailyn Lowry admitted outright that she was not always comfortable being constantly filmed. She told Stephanopoulos, “There are certain times when you feel really vulnerable and you want to experience something by yourself but you have these cameras there.” And she also admitted cameras create more stress. What was interesting was not these particular admissions by Lowry—they are common amongst reality star interview responses—but what both Houska and Lowry admitted near the end of the Stephanopoulos interview, as they relented on their criticism of the camera. They thought being filmed, despite their moments of aversion, was overall positive because of the consistent documentation of their babies’ lives, which most ordinary people are not afforded. Both also agreed that being filmed made them better, that having the cameras present added pressure, undue or not, to be better “role models,” as they put it. Their admission, at its core, is that they might not be as good of people if they were not being surveilled so fully by MTV’s cameras. The ideological underpinning here is no different than the one associated with a closed-circuit television system (CCTV) set up at a daycare or preschool, where small children can be watched anytime during the day on a parent’s digital device of their choosing. It is no different than CCTV at the workplace, where surveillance is employed to pressure employees into good work

ethic. The crux of this kind of CCTV implementation is that someone is always watching, and therefore always regulating behavior—and on Teen Mom 2, apparently, for the better.

The reality stars of MTV's Jersey Shore, however, do not share Houska and Lowry's moral impetus. If anything, the camera is a catalyst for their debauch; the notion of an attentive viewing audience inspires long nights of fist-pumping, and the seeking out of eager partners to "smush," Jersey Shore's slang for sex. Before the show's conclusion in December 2012, MTV's most successful reality program in years had been cited by watchdog groups for prominent displays of violence against women, irresponsible sexual behavior, binge drinking, and negative ethnic portrayals of Italian-Americans. And it delivered on all fronts. The show's most public and publicly shamed star is Nicole "Snooki" Polizzi. In late 2011, she was invited onto a short-lived experimental reality TV show on the CW Network called H8R, which offered celebrities with notorious reputations the chance to confront their critics and prove them wrong. Snooki's retort to her particular "hater," an Italian-American himself espousing inauthenticiy on Snooki's part, was that the person her hater knows as Snooki, or understands her to be, is not who she actually is. "He's talking about somebody that is not even real," Snooki told H8R host Mario Lopez. Then she told her hater directly to his face, "You have no idea who I am as a person." The initial supposition might be that her televisual identity is, in fact, performed, that she receives a sum of money from MTV to "act" as this Snooki character for their show. This, however, is complicated by instances where the cast of Jersey Shore do confirm the accuracy of the show's depictions of personality, especially regarding past cast members they do not maintain good relationships with, like Angelina Pivarnick. In addition, Snooki perpetuates Snooki-like behavior off camera, in her personal life and in the unprovocated conjuring of Snooki on red carpets and reunion specials, where some of her more memorable outbursts and bizarre poses have plastered themselves into the hearts and minds of the American pop culture zeitgeist. There is no distinction between "Snooki" and "Nicole Polizzi," despite what the CW's H8R suggests.

It is interesting, though, that Snooki makes a significant distinction between who she is as a "real person" versus what appears on MTV, her represented self, but the distinction between the two should be more nuanced. The assumption Snooki makes is that her filmed behavior is not indicative of her own personality, and while the total breadth of her subjective self might not be

effectively conveyed through MTV's reality program, to completely disavow her filmed self is a fallacy. Amid her protestations, it is important also to consider that Jersey Shore had run for six seasons before its end, totaling to about fifty hours of Snooki behavior for the audience to consume and configure. And this is not even taking into account the multiple MTV specials and other shows she had appeared on promoting Jersey Shore. Though she might be subconsciously indebted to a certain behavior pattern, there is literally no script for the show, no one ever forced Snooki to act the way she does. Before season four, away from the camera's gaze, she even went through an extreme fitness period, changing her diet, no longer club-hopping or living that storied New Jersey lifestyle. Upon their reuniting, the Jersey Shore cast barely recognized Snooki. For the viewer, she has displayed an ability to change, that her personality is not strictly defined by stereotype and popular perception, and that she exhibits a range of emotion and reaction—this is a far cry from a stereotypical sitcom character. For ordinary people, after a certain amount of time in front of the camera lens, there is no depth beyond the cliché "what you see is what you get," because depth is seen. If all we had was MTV as document for Nicole "Snooki" Polizzi, we would understand her to be entirely subjective. Despite the trend in Western culture to deny representations of the self, simply because they are not coming directly from the person being mediated, representation is not de facto misrepresentation.

This is not to take away culpability from the producers of Jersey Shore, or any reality TV program for that matter. In fact, manipulative editing techniques were employed pervasively in season four promotional materials to hype a particular fist fight between two Jersey Shore housemates, Ronnie Ortiz-Magro and Mike "The Situation" Sorrentino. By the time the fight had arrived in episode five of that season, the audience was met by something drastically different than the knock-out brawl the promos had advertised. While the two men did verbally argue quite fiercely, Sorrentino ended up in an ambulance as a consequence of a self-inflicted head wound incurred while throttling his skull against a bedroom wall, in a kind of primal masculine display. He was unaware the wall was composed of concrete. The promos had clearly depicted this as a dead serious fight, with one combatant doomed to hospitalization, but its sheer impotence was the work of false expectation created by producers. The fact that the fist fight turned out not really much of one at all must have been a disappointment for the production staff, but not so much that they were unwilling to tinker

with the details for promotional hype. The point of this argument is not to say producers are free of blame. For instance, whether true or not, MTV producers have always envisioned and enforced Snooki as the archetypal “drunken party girl,” even as she transitioned into motherhood in her off-camera (and on-camera) life. Yet there are layers of mediation and performance to consider, not just the production side. One of those layers happens to belong to the interdependent technologies of cameras and television, but these technologies are no longer valid scapegoats.

The circumstance by which these technologies affect 21st Century life should be understood as a recursive dynamic. On the one hand, there are the various social constructions of self to consider, the performance of the everyday also visible within the reality TV paradigm. On the other, there are the mediated articulations of self, like on reality TV, which are consumed and recursively inform social constructions to varying degrees. French theorist Jean Baudrillard argues there is no discernible separation between the filmed document relayed through television and tangible social reality; he says TV is now “intangible, diffused, and diffracted in the real” (22). However, the fact that mediated versions of reality are indistinguishable from their lived-in counterpart does not take into account the fact that mediated selves, like Snooki within the Jersey Shore text, can exist autonomously from their real selves, assuming a degree of ignorance or apathy on the part of the viewer. A more pertinent way to deal with the televisual image’s providence is by considering mediation occurring as the “backdrop” to modern life, wholly influential, but not its ultimate determiner. Sociologist Anthony Giddens redirects Baudrillard’s totalizing notion of “hyperreality,” by which the image supersedes reality, in saying that hyperreality “confuses the pervasive impact of mediated experience with the internal referentiality of the social systems of modernity...” (5). By way of Giddens, the televisual document and the real people it conveys are feasibly distinct. However, going back to Snooki, her degree of exposure to the camera lens configures something much closer to Baudrillard’s sense of hyperrealism, because her mediation conveys such depth. Indeed, the reality TV star is in a unique position because of the time spent in front of the camera in various emotional and physical states. As such, per media scholars Anita Biressi and Heather Nunn, reality TV “offers the new ‘fullness’ of a mediated reality and hence, whilst very much a part of the new media environment, it draws on the embodied human encounter to signify emotional

and existential realism...” (98). In return, Snooki’s off-camera self and on-camera self recursively affect each other to the extent that they are indistinguishable.

The larger cultural and technological milieu that contemporary reality TV occurs within must also be taken into account. Baudrillard made the claim that TV was an intangible component of reality in the 1970s, before personal communication technology was stashed away in our pockets and purses, all equipped with expectant camera lenses, all able to deliver video at lightning speeds on a whim to whomever, wherever. Society today is centered on the televisual image, be it streamed on laptops or on sixty inches of HDTV bliss. Out of this cultural preoccupation, CCTV theorist Kevin Walby calls the resulting ideology “imagocentric,” or faith in the image (192). The image is, after all, the contemporary epistemological referent, as evidenced by much of 21st Century essentialist presumption—the court’s reliance on visual documents, for example, passport photos and driver’s licenses, x-rays and CAT scans, Facebook, dating websites. A profile posted on eHarmony with no attached image gets far less romantic traffic, so the website strongly encourages users to post their pictures, and to take them “wide-eyed,” they are the windows to the soul. Can you see yourself with a person who has no image? Nevermind the rampant fraud perpetrated by Adobe Photoshop. And this might signal the image’s unique fraudulence if it were not for the weight its detractors give it.

Case in point: often chided reality star Jake Pavelka, who embarked on a Public Relations blitzkrieg after his nasty and well-documented breakup with Vienna Girardi in 2010. The couple met on ABC’s The Bachelor, where Girardi won Pevelka over, but their union quickly deteriorated amidst rumors of Jake Pavelka’s unrepentant desire for celebrity and monstrous vanity; one of the lingering criticisms of his stint on The Bachelor was how little time he spent on-screen with a shirt on. In an attempt to clear the air of petty tabloid speculation, ABC filmed a live special to offer the embattled couple the opportunity to clarify the circumstances of their breakup and set the record straight. What ensued only further denigrated public perception: they went at each other like two rabid felines—Pavelka came off as unsympathetic and sexist, while host Chris Harrison played inconsequent peace maker. In a later interview, Harrison went on to call Pavelka and Girardi’s interaction “childish.” But Pavelka’s prevailing argument has been and still is what you see on ABC is not what you get in “real life.” To prove that very point, Pavelka even lampooned himself on

Lifetime Television's successful primetime soap Drop Dead Diva. And in various venues, he has been pressed to defend his actions: ABC's Dancing with the Stars, VH1's Famous Food, and, just like Snooki, an appearance on the CW's H8R, where he was unable to sway his adamant critic. So Pavelka's image was concretized through The Bachelor—he never had an argument to the contrary. Rumors regarding his sexual orientation, anger problems, and general "fakeness," as Vienna Girardi puts it, spread without deterrent. Around the same time as their disastrous ABC live special, Girardi was interviewed by Star magazine and claimed that "if there wasn't an audience watching, [Jake] wasn't affectionate with her." Taking Girardi at face value here, Jake Pavelka's own physical expression is imagocentric; only when he is made into image is he excited, or excited to perpetuate an already propagated image. But for Pavelka to assume someone is not always watching, that he is not always in a state of being filmed, is an error.

Armitage, Smyth, and Pease, in a 1999 study on the effectiveness of metropolitan closed-circuit systems, discovered a phenomenon occurring in many areas where CCTV had been recently and explicitly implemented; in other words, security cameras installed in such a way that they are not hidden, but clearly distinguished. Under these heightened conditions of surveillance, the effect, often, was that people were more prone to surveil one another. Armitage, Smyth, and Pease refer to this behavioral byproduct as "natural surveillance" (226). And the same activity replicates itself on reality TV. Critic Lee Baron notices it in his analysis of the BBC's Big Brother, saying that the "most direct level of observation [between housemates] is at the personal, of each other" (32). Now, a hefty cash prize is at stake on Big Brother, which problematizes this association, but there is no denying that the same direct level of observation takes place on fishbowl reality TV, in which nothing monetary is at stake, like The Real World or Jersey Shore. Housemates on both these shows are wholly fixated on each other's movements, sentiments, beliefs—surveillance is situated at the personal. But even this level of external fixation seems myopic, especially given contemporary technological realities. And in the case of Armitage, Smyth, and Pease, it is security cameras that defy the limitations of the human eye and brain; their omnipotence inform us of our lack, thereby spurring natural surveillance—technology's awareness incites our awareness. Today, we are equipped, in our pockets and purses, with the very tools of our surveillance, and enact it through online posts on social networks like Facebook and YouTube, which propel the constant

digital stream of personal data and intimate televisual representation. Jake Pavelka got it entirely wrong; someone is always watching, and if not technology proper, then all of us eager to naturally surveil one another.

Referring back to Kailyn Lowry's initial misgivings in the Stephanopoulos interview—the little privacy she had been afforded while Teen Mom 2 cameras were present—it is imperative to consider that the modern tendency is to reduce privacy, to document more of our lives and not less. These are circumstances she, too, lives with and indulges; one example is Lowry's Facebook page, on which she talks to her fans directly. Another example is Lowry's contract with a celebrity talent agency, through which she books paid appearances. Lowry claims the camera creates more stress, something the majority of reality stars typically attest, alluding to a dysfunctional environment for the human psyche. And since the conditions of filming are more stressful than off-camera reality, reality stars can safely disassociate themselves from their filmed actions. However, reality television and its parameters are always already self-imposed: contracts are drawn, lawyers are paid, and, as result, no participant involved in the production is ignorant of the process going in. Furthermore, this is not the first season of The Real World in 1992; being surrounded by image technology and its operators is not a novelty anymore, it is a foregone conclusion. The imagocentric way of being has so firmly penetrated popular consciousness that using stress as a scapegoat is fallacious. The camera today is affirming not stressful; it validates personal inclinations, especially when hitting emotional lows. Similar to its use in the court system, televisual evidence gives weight and validity to our lived actions. If we deem a person's behavior abhorrent, we take video of it, show it to friends, post it to YouTube for anonymous affirmation, then video our exacted revenge, sure to receive similar praise and validation. In 2010, on Sixteen and Pregnant, Kailyn Lowry shared the first months of her baby's life with MTV's audience. Her sleepless nights and altercations with her impulsive boyfriend, all documented in high definition, serve as Lowry's own validation. The viewing audience sharing in her experience makes it more real, and her suffering more righteous.

It is easy to blame the camera—its techno-objective status offers no retort. But away from the technological component lay another issue: reality stars, in Deborah Jermyn's reasoning, these "ordinary" made "extraordinary" people who are the sole subject of this essay, are in a unique

circumstance, not just for their celebrity, but the means by which they attain that status. A typical celebrity goes through a prolonged period of grooming. Lady Gaga is a recent example of someone who garnered fame through channels of attraction and worked her way through a tiered system of popularity before becoming a global success. She had the help of what theorist Chris Rojek refers to as “cultural intermediaries,” like publicists and promoters and marketing personnel, who assist in a gradual and prolonged style of celebrity (10). Rojek says performers like Lady Gaga bear “achieved celebrity.” This, however, is juxtaposed by reality TV stars who maintain “attributed celebrity.” So it comes as no surprise that Jermynian-style reality TV stars disassociate themselves from what appears on-screen; their popularity materialized from nothing. They may not have suspected so many people would care so passionately about their life, about who they are and how they represent themselves. No squad of cultural intermediaries clued these reality stars into the tediousness of renown, even if the reality TV paradigm is no longer a novelty. Surely they feel some acute disdain toward their miraculous celebrity—as ordinary people, they undoubtedly feel cheated of their “ordinary” rights to unfettered, unobserved happiness.

Snooki is an example of this contradictory phenomenon. Her desire in life, deep down, as she had expressed again and again on Jersey Shore, was to marry a good Italian-American boy, who loves his mother and make babies with said boy, which she eventually did with Jionni LaValle; their relationship and parenthood is chronicled on the Jersey Shore spin-off series Snooki & Jwow, also on MTV. Snooki goes into season four of the Jersey Shore newly-unioned with LaValle, who does not care to be filmed nor does he necessarily enjoy Snooki’s notoriety, but stays with her, as far as the viewer can surmise, for the sake of love. It is safe to say that Snooki models LaValle into this Italian-American fantasy male of hers. During the duration of season four, set in Italy, LaValle comes to visit her during filming, and the idea of Snooki acting salacious in front of the camera, for his appreciation no less, is so horrifying for LaValle, that he runs away from the film crew, refusing to be a party to the taping. After his breakdown, LaValle boards a plane home to America as soon as possible, and only speaks to Snooki via phone. The end result is a couple episodes worth of tears on Snooki’s part; her reaction is genuine. This is the expectation of someone ordinary being interfered with by their attributed extraordinary status—it might have even made Snooki nostalgic for the days when no one cared about her life.

Reality stars also commonly cite editing as one of the reasons why they cannot be held accountable for what appears on-screen. Spencer Pratt, of MTV's The Hills, is infamous for blaming the show's editors and production staff for his decidedly negative portrayal on the cancelled reality show, and contestants on CBS's Survivor frequently deny wrongdoing, despite the competitive nature of the show encouraging and rewarding morally reprehensible behavior. No Survivor editor sabotaged a rival team's tent or stole a life-sustaining bag of rice. The problem in refuting the editing angle is that reality TV scholarship and theory tends to demonize editing as well. Estella Tincknell and Parvati Raghuram's 2002 analysis of BBC's Big Brother is a prime example; they boldly claim that "Big Brother's 'story' was mediated by the combination of editing and voiceover commentary" and helped "produce the 'preferred' version" of the show, centering on the sexual behavior of the contestants (205). Yet the alternative would be something similar to a twenty-four hour stream of a person's life, akin to the early 2000s when Big Brother appeared on CBS in the U.S. for the first time with an accompanied web site that offered a live, ongoing stream of the housemates as they slept, ate, and sat on couches aimlessly. The live stream of Big Brother imploded on itself, and rightfully so—seeing people being bored is itself quite boring. But, taking into account what we choose to display of ourselves on social networking websites, which are used as authentic documents in court and in the larger interpersonal world, it seems selective editing might not be restricted to the reality TV format, actually something more culturally endemic.

If we did not cherry pick our own lives, then reality TV editing could be considered more offensive, but what we represent of ourselves on Facebook and other social networking sites is only our best moments, our worst, our most funny, and even some of the inane is prioritized. Editing is not the enemy of actuality but instead serves to keep us interested, coddling our technorific ADHD attention spans. Moreover, if the editors were somehow cutting things together to make fights between roommates appear objectively worse or their personalities seem more abrasive, then there would be far less scene continuity in reality TV; these shows would be choppy and nonsensical. Jersey Shore producers could only convince viewers that season four's impotent fight was a knock-out brawl in thirty-second promotional spots; the complete text told a much different tale. Just because it is "trash TV," as detractors say, does not mean reality TV can function without

a coherent narrative. Centering the focus of reality TV on the illicit, on the funny and violent, is an editor doing what comes naturally to them in the 21st Century.

Currently, much academic discourse regarding reality TV is stilted; rather than rebuking technology's already established role in society, the prevailing methodology, the more effective avenue for exploration is assessing reality TV for its reflective qualities, not illusory ones. Critics attempting to maintain the validity of higher cultural representation tend to deflect this televisual format's intrinsic value and impact, but reality TV—its sensationalism, its editing—is the product of what technology critic N. Katherine Hayles calls a "coevolutionary dynamic" between humans and the digital (113). And this coevolution has its place in academia, too; we teach on high definition projectors with PowerPoint—we compose our material on word processors, and often use the same research strategies as casual internet users. No more must we methodically keep track of notes, write lecture details on the chalkboard, not when the computer stores the information for us, goes through default processes of organization, offers us 1,500 alphabetized scholarly returns ready to access with a mouse click. If the reality format somehow reduces the human experience, as critics contend, then that merely reflects the larger tendency of all people toward reduction, supposed or otherwise.

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