

5-1997

# The political economy of Reali-TV

Chad Raphael

*Santa Clara University*, [craphael@scu.edu](mailto:craphael@scu.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarcommons.scu.edu/comm>



Part of the [Communication Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Raphael, C. (1997). The political economy of Reali-TV. *Jump Cut*, 41, 102-109.

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.5 License](#). Copyright © *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media*, 1997, 2006. No changes were made. <http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/onlinessays/JC41folder/EconomyRealiTV.html>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the College of Arts & Sciences at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Communication* by an authorized administrator of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact [rscroggin@scu.edu](mailto:rscroggin@scu.edu).

**Raphael, C. (1997). The political economy of Reali-TV. *Jump Cut*, 41, 102-109.**

Post-print author version. For published version, see  
<http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/onlinessays/JC41folder/EconomyRealiTV.html>.

From the sea change in U.S. television in the 1980s emerged a programming trend variously described as "infotainment," "reality-based television," "tabloid TV," "crime-time television," "trash TV," and "on-scene shows." [1] The welter of terms created by television critics to describe these new programs masked their underlying connection as a response to economic restructuring within the industry. This essay offers a rough categorization of these programs, sketches the industrial context from which they emerged, and points to the economic problems they were meant to solve. [2] Although my focus here is on political economy, rather than on textual or audience issues, I do not want to imply that these programs' cultural significance can be reduced to their relations of production and distribution. Yet without understanding the political-economic forces which drove the spread of this genre, textual and audience studies risk reifying it as an expression of audience demand, or of their creators, or of a cultural, discursive, or ontological shift unrelated to the needs of those who run the television industry. If this genre exhibits a kind of textual excess, its emergence reflects a relative scarcity of means. I conclude with suggestions for how textual and audience studies might link the new "reality" of television to shifts in the larger U.S. political-economy since the mid-1980s.

Among the swirl of neologisms, my preferred term for these programs will be "Reali-TV," [3] which has the advantage of stressing the programming medium (versus "infotainment"), of illuminating connections between seemingly different programs (such as "crime-time," "tabloid TV" and "on-scene shows"), and of avoiding the high cultural bias implicit in the notion of "trash TV." The term "Reali-TV" reminds us of the inseparability of "reality" and "television" in these texts. It points to the overarching connections between these otherwise disparate textual forms, which lie both in their distinctive claims to represent the real (and the need to interrogate those claims), and their common impact on the realities of power and economic relations in the industry. Reali-TV, then, is an umbrella term for a number of programming trends that have rapidly expanded since the late 80s across all hours of network schedules, first-run syndication, and cable.

Production practices common to these programs include the following:

- extensive use of "actuality" footage of their subjects, whether these are police staking out a drug den or Mom and Dad yukking it up in front of the camcorder;
- reenactments of events, performed by professional actors, or by the people who experienced them, or a mix of both;
- a tendency to avoid the studio in favor of "on-scene" shooting, sometimes at the same place where the events they represent occurred;
- mixing footage shot by unpaid amateur videographers with that of professionals;
- appealing to the conventions of "liveness," and "immediacy" through on-location interviews, subjective camera work, and synchronized sound;
- and appropriating traditional conventions of news coverage, such as the use of anchors or hosts, remote reporting, and the pretense to "spontaneity."

These production techniques are combined differently in five formats of Reali-TV, which can be distinguished according to how much each relies on nontraditional labor (for story development, writing, performing, and camerawork) and production inputs (such as sets, props, and costumes.) Two formats continue to depend mainly on professional labor and traditional inputs. First, the network newsmagazines — whose ranks have swollen in the past few years with the introduction of *48 Hours* and *Street Stories* (CBS), *Primetime Live* (ABC), *Dateline NBC*, and others — are still entirely professionally-produced and employ the same mix of studio and location footage as the evening news. The same is true of tabloid TV shows (such as the syndicated *A Current Affair* and its imitators), despite their different representational strategies. However, several other formats use hybrid production techniques. Hidden video programs (such as *Totally Hidden Video*), which enjoyed a minor resurgence in the early 1990s, rely on professional camera crews and actors maneuvering unsuspecting non-professional performers into embarrassing or humorous situations.

Crime-time and emergency response programs (*Rescue 911*, *America's Most Wanted*, *Unsolved Mysteries*, and the many imitators these shows have spawned on cable and first-run syndication), are shot and edited by professionals, and introduced by a regular host. Yet they also may employ some amateur footage of disasters, and nonprofessional performers enacting their own rescues or crime experiences. These programs also take advantage of props, sets, costumes, etc. provided by law enforcement authorities, corrections institutions, parole boards, and emergency medical crews. Finally, home video programs (such as *America's Funniest Home Videos*) rely on amateur footage that is professionally edited. This format depends most heavily on nontraditional inputs and amateur labor, not only for "scripting," performing and shooting the hijinks, but also to do the work of studio audiences (who vote for the "funniest" video, for example). Before discussing how these techniques have lowered production costs, we need to examine the larger economic picture from whence they sprang.

## **DECLINE OF THE NETWORKS: WEBS WANE AS COMPETITION CLIMBS!**

As a fiscal strategy, Reali-TV emerged in the late 1980s in response to the economic restructuring of U.S. television. Much of the restructuring story has been told by scholars and in the trade press: how the number of video distribution channels expanded rapidly, with the growth of cable, VCRs, the Fox network, and local independent stations; how the television audience was increasingly fragmented; how advertising revenues now had to be spread among a larger pool of distributors; and how this dilution of advertising spending created pressure on broadcasters and cablecasters to cut per-program production costs. Less cited causes for production budget cuts included the high levels of corporate debt incurred by the big three networks after each was sold in the mid-80s,[4] and advertiser-driven changes in audience measurement techniques designed to identify specific market segments (most notorious was the People-Meter, which yielded dramatically lower ratings for the networks[5]).

By the late 1980s, then, the economic picture of U.S. television had become decidedly more crowded. If the networks remained in the foreground as the major economic force in the industry, the purveyors of cable, VCRs, and first-run syndication winked and beckoned viewers in the background. Advertisers and audience measurement services busily tried to record who was watching what, how much attention they paid to the commercial breaks, and whether they were buying any of it. However, to understand how Reali-TV emerged as a cost-cutting solution

in this new economic environment of the late 1980s, we need to examine how increased competition in the distribution of television programming affected the sphere of production.

### **SQUEEZE ON PRODUCTION: OUCH! WEBS AND SUPPLIERS FEEL THE PINCH**

As television distributors fought over smaller advertising shares, and shouldered more debt, program producers (network production arms, major Hollywood studios, and the few small independent production companies) all faced rapidly rising costs in the 1980s. For prime-time producers, the average cost of an hour drama soared to over \$1 million per episode by the end of the decade, and costs were increasing by roughly 8%-10% a year.[6] Prices were driven up primarily by "above the line" costs such as talent, direction, scriptwriting, music composition, computer animation, and location costs.[7] The star system for above-the-line labor became especially pronounced, as network programmers, agent-packagers, and production companies responded to the greater risks of capital involved in creating new shows by increasingly demanding names associated with prior success. Greater demand for stars created an artificial labor shortage and inflated salaries for the lucky few.

These rising costs were accompanied by smaller per-show revenues, creating a squeeze on production companies' earnings from both sides of the ledger. Producers were forced to accept smaller license fees for their programs than they had commanded from the networks before the new era of competition. The threatened networks were scaling back outlays, and pay-cable and cable network distributors and syndicators also lacked deep pockets for program purchases. In addition, changes in federal tax laws eliminated producers' investment tax credits, which often meant the difference between earning a profit and taking a loss on a program.[8] By mid-decade, caught between rising costs and lower network license fees, most producers could no longer make back their investments in first-run network showings. By 1986, producers were losing up to \$100,000 per episode for half hour shows, and \$200,000 to \$300,000 for hour dramas.[9] Producers now were forced to deficit-finance their programs and cross their fingers in hopes the show would survive three network seasons, providing enough episodes for domestic and foreign syndication and a chance to recoup their initial investments.

### **PRODUCERS TO LABOR: DROP DEAD**

Feeling the squeeze on profits, production companies and the networks initiated a series of cost-cutting strategies that translated into an attack on labor, mainly on below-the-line workers such as technicians, engineers, and extras. The first move was a wave of staff cutbacks at studios and network news departments. In the mid-1980s, Fox cut 20% of its studio staff, Capital Cities/ABC 10% of its staff, CBS 30% of its administrative staff and 10% of its News Division. NBC resisted a 17-week strike by the National Association of Broadcast Employees and Technicians (NABET) in 1987, shedding 200 union jobs. By 1992, NBC had eliminated 30% of its News Division through layoffs and bureau closings. Even network standards and practices departments, much-derided self-censors of the broadcasting industry, faced the ax.[10]

The second part of the cost cutting strategy involved attempts to bypass union labor, spurring an unprecedented wave of strikes by above- and below-line labor unions and craft guilds. In addition to the NABET, the Directors Guild, the American Federation of Musicians (AFM), the Screen Extras Guild (SEG), and American Federation of Radio and Television Artists (AFTRA)

all struck, while the Screen Actors Guild (SAG) struck twice, and the Writers Guild three times. Above-the-line workers especially sought more residuals for the use of programs on new media and overseas.[11] Lower paid labor, such as members of the Screen Extras Guild, took a more defensive stand commensurate with their weaker bargaining power. The SEG strike ended with union members accepting a 25% wage cut, changes in overtime schedules, and the acceptance of producers' prerogative to hire more non-union labor. (The extras' bargaining position was hurt by the Screen Actors Guild's refusal to merge with the less powerful union or even to support its position in contract negotiations.) This increase in labor unrest was both a response to, and motivating force, in attempts to break the power of the unions.

As a result, producers exacerbated the long-term split in the Hollywood labor market between "core" workers (such as the successful SAG members who enjoy higher pay, more job security, and who share management tasks and interests) and "periphery" workers (such as the SEG members, who have little job security, work part-time schedules, and suffer lower wage scales).[12] Producers also responded to union demands by using non-union Hollywood labor, and shifting production to regions where cheaper labor was available, such as Canada and the "right-to-work" states of the U.S. South.

These tactics cut across entertainment and news program production. Disney and MCA led the industry shift toward building studio complexes in Florida. The loss of the investment tax credit, which was only applicable to programs produced in the U.S., helped spur a shift of production to Canada, where lower costs and more pliable unions could save \$200,000 to \$300,000 an episode for dramatic series.[13] In news programming, CNN and Fox led the way in producing with lower-paid, non-union labor and by breaking down job classifications, and their "success" was increasingly imitated by the traditional networks. One former CBS executive noted that the lesson of CNN was "Break the unions!"[14] NBC appears to have learned the lesson quickest, developing a 24 hour a day affiliate news service based in Charlotte, North Carolina and staffed with non-union labor. Some Fox affiliates experimented with subcontracting their entire evening newscasts.

## **EXTRA, EXTRA! REALI-TV FITS THE BILL**

Reali-TV shows gained currency in this environment of relative financial scarcity and labor unrest of the late 1980s. Economically, the genre fit the needs of producers and distributors alike for cheaper programming. First, these programs largely did away with higher-priced stars and union talent. The only "name" actors on these shows were briefly seen as hosts. In the crime-time/emergency shows, roles in reenactments of crimes and rescues were filled by unknown actors and, sometimes, by the people the stories were based upon. In programs such as *Cops*, segments followed law enforcement officials in the course of their work, eschewing reenactments and the need for actors entirely. The home video and hidden video programs likewise avoided professional union talent. In bypassing more expensive performers, the programs' producers also escaped the grips of the Hollywood agents, who had come to occupy the role of program developers and packagers in the early 1980s, and who exacted considerable fees for their services.[15]

Producers of Reali-TV, particularly of the crime-time/ emergency shows and home and hidden video programs, led a wider industry move toward using non-union, freelance production crews.

The Arthur Co. offers a good example. In 1987, it lost the rights to produce the network prime-time drama *Airwolf*, after battling with the Writers Guild over cable royalties, then turned to producing low budget, non-union programs for syndication and basic cable. In 1991, Arthur Co. returned to primetime with *FBI: the Untold Stories*, a Reali-TV reprise of the bureau's long-running romance with the tube. Similarly, Fox's *America's Most Wanted*, one of the trendsetters of Reali-TV when it premiered in 1987, used different freelance crews for each segment. Even some newsmagazines, such as *CBS Street Stories*, turned to freelance camera crews and news producers. The home video programs relied on amateur camcorder enthusiasts and freelance professionals. Reali-TV producers also partook of the move to cheaper labor regions. Grosso-Jacobson Entertainment, which has created more crime-time shows than any other production house (including *Top Cops*, *True Blue*, and *Secret Service*), shot all of its patriotic paeans to U.S. law enforcers in Toronto.[16]

The 1988 Writers' Strike, a twenty-two week affair which delayed the opening of the fall season, was crucial for the rise of Reali-TV. Existing Reali-TV shows were largely unaffected by the strike, since they already relied very little on writers. In addition, the delay of the season gave producers and programmers the impetus to develop future shows which did not depend on writing talent. Tabloid TV pioneer Peter Brennan (of *Hard Copy*), when asked whether he was concerned about a potential SAG strike in 1992, shrugged off the threat: "Remember the Writers Guild strike in '88?...that was the year that gave rise to reality TV." [17]

Reali-TV programs also cut costs by wholeheartedly embracing low-end production values. Direct cinema techniques such as handheld cameras and the use of available lighting made shows without reenactments (such as *Cops* and the network newsmagazines) particularly cheap. Programs that employ reenacted material (such as *Rescue 911* and *Unsolved Mysteries*) often avoid traditionally painstaking lighting and make-up to approximate the "real" look of direct cinema footage, and its relatively low production costs. Although the reenactments may require some expenses for on-location shooting, going on-scene is often less costly than renting studio space. In addition, crime-time and emergency shows have minimized costs of sets, props, and costumes by convincing the agencies they profile to donate police cars, equipment, and even uniforms for the production crew, so they can pass for police at a crime scene.[18] Finally, research and logistical costs for most categories of Reali-TV shows are tempered by the information subsidies traditionally extended to the news and entertainment media by public relations operatives hoping to plant favorable stories about their government agency, medical technology, legal clients, etc.[19]

As a result of their shoestring production budgets, primetime Reali-TV shows enjoy the distinction of recouping their makers' investments from network license fees alone. With rare exceptions, Reali-TV is the only prime-time programming category which is not deficit-financed (see table 1, which is based on production costs for a representative season.) Reali-TV also enjoys success in the low-fee first run syndication and made-for-cable fields; the growth of copycat Reali-TV shows has occurred primarily in these markets.

## **FINANCE AND SYNDICATION: REALI-TV RIGHT FOR FYN SIN FIGHT**

A changing regulatory climate also contributed to the economic advantages of Reali-TV. In 1970, amid concerns about network power over production companies, the FCC barred the

networks from owning a financial interest in, and retaining syndication rights to, most primetime entertainment programming (daytime shows, sports, and news were not affected.) The financial and syndication, or "finsyn," rules also limited the number of hours of primetime shows the network could produce. A 1980 consent decree in an antitrust case further limited network primetime entertainment production to 2.5 hours per week for several years. When the FCC enacted the finsyn rules, its stated goals were to encourage local programming and small independent producers. In regard to the latter aim, the FCC hoped that if network production were reined in, other producers might create more innovative, diverse programming. But the small independents have not flourished, as the large capital investments and risks required of program producers meant that Hollywood studios with substantial financing would control the field. As with the small independents in the film industry, television's smaller production houses depend on winning network contracts for their programming before they can secure bank financing to make it.[20] Independents thus have not enjoyed a great deal of financial or creative power over the development of new programming, especially when compared with the major studios or the top agent-packagers. In many ways, the same relations hold true in first-run syndication and the made-for-cable markets. Here, the small independents are often financed by the big multi-system operators (such as Time-Warner) and the dominant distribution companies (including those run by major studios) in exchange for syndication rights.

Throughout the 1980s, the networks challenged the finsyn rules, arguing that they were no longer in a position to dominate program distribution as they had before the spread of cable and VCRs, and that they needed to be allowed to compete internationally in the global television market. In 1991 the FCC allowed the networks to finance and syndicate their own in-house or co-produced programs, and to negotiate for the rights to some outside-produced shows. A long series of appeals by Hollywood studios and independent producers was exhausted by 1994, and the finsyn rules were repealed.

Although Fox has been unaffected by the finsyn rules and has always produced the bulk of its programming in house,[21] the three major networks may very well have anticipated the repeal of these restrictions and positioned themselves to syndicate Reali-TV programming domestically and abroad. One of the striking characteristics of primetime Reali-TV programs is that so many of them are network productions or co-productions (see table 1). This is true not only of the network newsmagazines, which are produced by their news divisions, but also of crime-time/emergency response and the home video shows. As producers and co-producers of the shows, networks can retain the rights to distribute them under the new rules.

## **INTERNATIONAL DISTRIBUTION: IT'S A REAL, REAL, REAL, REAL WORLD**

Producers and network investors have also been attracted to Reali-TV because of its ability to sell abroad. Since primetime Reali-TV earns back its production costs with the first U.S. network showing, any further syndication represents pure profit. U.S. Reali-TV has been sold overseas using two methods. Some shows are licensed outright to foreign broadcasters, the way most U.S. programming traditionally has been marketed. Episodes of top-rated network crime-time/emergency programs *Unsolved Mysteries* and *Rescue 911* have been sold abroad in this manner. One international program distributor claims,

The easiest and most profitable thing for a distributor to do with reality shows is to license them as they are. Prices can even approach what distributors get for action-adventure hours in some territories."[22] By 1991, *Rescue 911* could be seen in Germany, Denmark, and Sweden; *Unsolved Mysteries* was available in Canada, Spain, France, and Japan.

However, many more shows have been formatted because of their topical or local nature. This method involves selling or licensing the program's concept for local production with local subjects. U.S. program footage may be sold as well to supplement the local version. As Asu Aksoy and Kevin Robins note, the challenge for contemporary media distributors

"is to transcend vestigial national difference and to create standardized global markets, whilst remaining sensitive to the peculiarities of local markets and differentiated consumer segments."[23]

Reali-TV has participated in this strategy of "global localization." Fremantle, a distributor of game shows and *Candid Camera*, provides a good example of how formatting works. Fremantle's C.E.O. maintains that the company

"operates in foreign markets like McDonald's does...There are Fremantle subsidiaries in some countries; in others there are franchise-holders who produce their own local versions of the original product."[24]

Home and hidden video shows tend to be formatted rather than licensed, allowing foreign broadcasters to insert their own clips into the programs. Crime-time shows have also been formatted: the Swedes have developed a version of *Cops*, and *America's Most Wanted* was transformed into the short-lived *Australia's Most Wanted* some years back. Tabloid TV programs also have been formatted or customized because they tend to be the most indigenous. Notes one executive producer, "In syndication, shows tend to be more topical and current...but they have to be more timeless for that backend revenue."[25]

Reali-TV's growth abroad has been aided by the widespread movement to privatize and deregulate broadcasting. As one distributor puts it:

"With some exceptions, public service broadcasters have always kept a tight lid on the definition of reality...The taste (for Reali-TV) has been stimulated abroad by increased commercialism, but reality shows haven't yet taken hold *en masse*...But because foreign broadcasters are tight for money, the attraction of reality will no doubt be considerable."[26]

Although both private and public broadcasters have purchased Reali-TV, the genre's growth is especially symptomatic of the need for public broadcasters increasingly to operate according to the logic of private channels, as competition for audiences and funding mounts.[27] In addition, the explosion of distribution channels in the 1980s was not only a U.S. phenomenon, but a global one; hence, some of the same cost pressures encountered by U.S. producers are being felt abroad. To better adapt to the globalizing television market, some Reali-TV has been conceived for international audiences first. Time-Warner/HBO's *World Entertainment Report*, for example,

was pre-licensed across Europe, Australia, and Japan. The program has a modular format which broadcasters can recompose to fit their needs, inserting local entertainment coverage if desired. In 1992, Talbot TV was planning *Inside Interpol*, the ultimate in global crime-time, involving reenactments of crimes handled by the international investigative agency.

The international spread of Reali-TV cannot be explained as the outcome of U.S. product innovation, since many European and Japanese programs pre-dated their U.S. counterparts. The top-rated U.S. tabloid, *A Current Affair*, was developed in Australia 20 years ago. *Crimewatch UK*, which reconstructs crimes and asks for viewers' assistance, preceded *America's Most Wanted* and *Unsolved Mysteries*, as did a similar Dutch program. An Italian game show that features couples airing their grievances against each other with the support of invited friends (a studio audience votes for the "winner") has been formatted for U.S. audiences. These transborder flows suggest that programs that appear to be products of rapid U.S. innovation when glimpsed from the national perspective are actually the result of an international circulation, and recirculation, of products through globalized media markets.

For example, the widely-formatted *America's Funniest Home Videos* was itself inspired by segments of the Japanese variety show *Fun Television with Kato-chan and Ken-chan*, which broadcasts humorous videos sent in by viewers. King World's revival of *Candid Camera* for foreign and domestic syndication, an attempt to capitalize on the success of *America's Funniest Home Videos*, similarly suggests that there is as much recycling of program formats as rapid innovation at work here. If U.S. television has always mixed the shock of the new with the familiarity of the formulaic, Reali-TV seems to indicate that U.S. producers are looking further abroad for "new" ideas, then repackaging them for domestic and international audiences. To the extent that the spread of the genre represents a "victory" for U.S.-based media producers, it is a packaging and marketing triumph.

## **CONCLUSION: WHAT PRICE REALITY?**

U.S. television underwent a dramatic restructuring in the 1980s, largely precipitated by changing patterns of distribution with the spread of cable and VCRs. As the networks' oligopolistic control over the distribution of television programming was challenged, audience ratings shares fragmented. Producers faced smaller license and syndication fees from an expanded customer base, which now included not only the networks, but local independent stations, cable networks and superstations, and first-run distributors. Confronted with rapidly rising above-the-line production costs, producers took it out on below-the-line labor, and sought cheaper forms of programming. Reali-TV fit the bill. Networks stepped in to produce what examples of this programming the FCC would allow (news magazines for the big three, all forms for Fox) and co-produced what kinds they were not permitted to own and syndicate under the finsyn rules, hoping they would be in a better position to negotiate for ownership rights when the rules were repealed. Reali-TV made a splash in Europe and Japan in the late 1980s and early 1990s as well, but many U.S. programs of this kind that were licensed and formatted abroad drew on foreign models in the first place. Thus, we should understand Reali-TV not merely as a radical generic innovation but as a recirculation of product among global media corporations.

By the beginning of the 1994 television season, there were signs that this programming trend was leveling off in the U.S., at least on primetime network schedules, if not in first-run

syndication.[28] Whereas 14 such series were developed for the 1992-93 season, only six were trickling down the pipe for 1994-95. There were a number of reasons for the decline. First, the tabloid shows failed to compete with game shows on the basis of production costs and ratings.[29] Second, television programmers' famous taste for imitation meant that their schedules were already saturated with Reali-TV. Third, just as the networks seemed assured of a total repeal of the finance and syndication rules, Reali-TV was garnering disappointingly low profits in off-network syndication markets, suggesting that the genre's topicality and timeliness made it less attractive to audiences the second time around.[30] Finally, advertisers were also growing wary of the genre. In part, advertisers became concerned about associating their products with the sexual and violent content in some programs of this ilk. More important, Reali-TV was not attracting enough affluent eighteen to thirty-five year olds, appealing more to pre-teens, seniors, and low-income viewers. These demographics forced the networks to sell advertising time on many Reali-TV shows at a discount compared with other programs with similar ratings and shares.

Nonetheless, Reali-TV is still with us, and continues to raise questions for television studies. Let me suggest briefly how we might draw connections between this genre and recent political-economic and cultural developments in U.S. life. The rise of the "crime-time/emergency services" programs, in particular, is clearly related to the increasing law and order conservatism of the past ten years. Whether the relationship is more one of agenda-setting or cultural reflection, these programs are closely linked to the growing needs of state agencies to foreground and manage their public images in hopes of attracting resources in an era of budget deficits; to the public relations activities of those who would privatize prisons; to the need to legitimate an unprecedented growth in the number of incarcerated Americans, thanks to the "War on Drugs" and mandatory sentencing laws; and, following the Rodney King video, to a need to excuse the new visibility of (the same old) police brutality.

Many Reali-TV programs are produced by former law enforcement officers, and most have fulltime police consultants. Debra Seagal, a former tape logger for *American Detective*, has recently described how producers of the now-defunct program routinely excised scenes of police brutality or trampling on the civil rights of suspects.[31] Mary Beth Oliver has shown that, like most television, these shows massively over-represent violent crimes (murder, rape, assault) versus crimes against property.[32] The greatest irony of the crime-time shows is that, in an industry that argues vehemently against government censorship of sex and violence, every episode of *Cops* is vetted by police before airing to ensure "accurate portrayals" of police work.

Those who celebrate television texts as inspiring an active, participatory viewership that is inherently progressive or popular need to confront the "active viewer" brought forth by crime-time programs. Among the most active are those viewers who respond to televised appeals to help law enforcement by dialing up hotlines to report sightings of fugitives and runaways. Aside from providing another information subsidy to the producers (who routinely air their tally of fugitives the program has helped to arrest, and follow-up stories on them), the solicitation of tips fosters a surveillance mentality. This kind of audience activity is not devoted to negotiating or resisting the dominant ideology in the text, but to embracing and acting upon it wholeheartedly. That some fugitives portrayed have not been formally charged with a crime, and have a right to freedom from prejudicial pre-trial publicity, as well as to privacy, is not often mentioned on these hunt-a-thons.

Reali-TV has also played a role in the redefinition of public service programming. In the Reagan-Bush climate of lax regulation, programmers did not need to fear FCC scrutiny of the violence and sexual content of Reali-TV, avoiding the costs of in-house standards and practices departments' close screening of these programs, and potential legal costs of defending them before the FCC. In addition, many Reali-TV producers recast broadcasters' "public service" and "educational" responsibilities to champion the civic value of their programs. Producers ignored traditional definitions of serving the public interest, which focused more on the discussion of public affairs, coverage of local issues, and developing children's intellectual or emotional abilities. Instead, the creators of crime-time programs in particular touted their public contribution as prompting citizens to help law enforcement officers track down their quarry. The executive producer of *America's Most Wanted* opined to *The FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin*:

"I believe we are witnessing the birth of a new era in citizen involvement. *America's Most Wanted* has organized some 22 million viewers into the first nationwide neighborhood watch association." [33]

In this vision of public service, surveillance of criminals replaces debate over public affairs, an oxymoronic "nationwide neighborhood watch association" offers a false sense of localism, and education is reduced to instructing viewers on how to avoid becoming a crime victim.

If there is a master trope for each Reali-TV format — crime time/emergency, home video, hidden video, tabloid, and newsmagazine — it may be participatory democracy. Popular participation in television programming is represented through Reali-TV's widespread use of hotlines which beckon viewers to participate in law enforcement as detectives or judges of others' guilt, through its celebration of a (highly professionally-constructed) amateur aesthetic in the increasing use of home video, through its offers to nonprofessionals to perform on camera, and through its claims of "democratizing" taste in news. Hence, Reali-TV is a critical site for engaging the central questions for contemporary television studies. When does the aesthetic of the popular become an administered populism? When is the popular reactionary? On whose terms are we allowed to participate in television production? Enquiring minds want to know.

## NOTES

1. Thanks to Rick Maxwell, Chuck Kleinhans, and David Tetzlaff for their comments on earlier versions of this essay.
2. Given space limits, I restrict my discussion to the distinctive political-economy of primetime series, putting aside made-for-tv docudramas and entire cable channels (such as Court TV) which may share similar production practices and genres.
3. The earliest use of this term I have encountered is in Ed Siegel, "It's Not Fiction. It's Not News. It's *Not* Reality. It's Reali-TV," *The Boston Globe*, May 26, 1991, p. A1.
4. In 1985 and 1986, after more than twenty years of stable ownership, all three networks changed hands, succumbing to the frenzy of corporate mergers and internationalization which characterized the decade. In 1985, Capital Cities took control of ABC; in 1986, General Electric purchased NBC and Laurence Tisch's Loews Corp assumed effective control over CBS. In addition, Rupert Murdoch's News Corp bought Twentieth Century Fox Studios and the Multimedia chain of independent television stations, using both to start a fourth network in 1986. Ken Auletta, *Three Blind Mice: How the TV Networks Lost Their Way* (New York: Random House, 1991.)
5. John Downing, "The Political Economy of U.S. Television," *Monthly Review* (May 1990), pp. 30-41.
6. Harold L. Vogel, *Entertainment Industry Economics: A Guide for Financial Analysis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press., 2nd ed., 1990), p. 171.
7. Patricia Bauer, "Production Scene: Hollywood's New Low-End Market," *Channels* 6, no. 8 (1986):14.
8. Prior to the 1986 restructuring of federal tax laws, producers were able to deduct 6.7 percent of the cost of their productions from their federal tax bills.
9. Bauer, 14.
10. For information on the staff cutbacks at the networks, and the NABET strike see Downing, 37-38; J. Max Robins, "Hired guns take over local news," *Variety*, September 24, 1990, p. 21. The censors' expendability was linked to the loose regulatory climate under the Reagan-era FCC. While self-censorship had been an important part of the networks' long-term strategy for averting government intervention in private broadcasting, the FCC largely ignored regulating content in the 1980s. The networks' real risks now emerged from angry viewers pressuring affiliates and advertisers to remove material from the air. Increasingly, content regulation was left to the market to decide.
11. Christopher H. Sterling and John M. Kittross, *Stay Tuned: A Concise History of American Broadcasting* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1990, 2nd ed.), p. 488.

12. On core and periphery labor forces in the Hollywood entertainment industry, see Susan Christopherson and Michael Storper, "The Effects of Flexible Specialization on Industrial Politics and the Labor Market: the Motion Picture Industry," *Industrial and Labor Relations Review*, 42, no. 3(1989): 331-347.
13. Bauer, 14.
14. Downing, 39.
15. On the role of agent-packagers, see Todd Gitlin, *Inside Prime Time* (New York: Pantheon, 1983), pp. 143-157.
16. On the Arthur Co., see Bauer, 14. On *America's Most Wanted*, see Daniel R. White, "America's Most Wanted," *ABA Journal* (October, 1989): 94. On Street Stories, see J. Max Robins, "Producers for Hire." *Variety*, February 24, 1992: 81.
17. Robins, "Producers for Hire," 81.
18. See Scott A. Nelson, "Crime-Time Television," *FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin* (August, 1989): 5.
19. On the role of information subsidies in news selection, see Oscar H. Gandy, Jr., "Information in Health: Subsidised News," *Media, Culture and Society* 2 (1980): 103-115.
20. On the constraints faced by "independent" film producers, see Asu Aksoy and Kevin Robins, "Hollywood for the 21st Century: Global Competition for Critical Mass in Image Markets." Unpublished manuscript, Centre for Urban and Regional Development Studies, University of Newcastle upon Tyne, 1991. On the similar financial dependence of small TV producers, see Vogel, 117; Gitlin, 136.
21. The finsyn rules had never been applied to Fox as the FCC did not define it as a network since it distributed less than 15 hours a week of programming.
22. Elizabeth Guider, "Yanks deal for real," *Variety*, June 3, 1991: 35.
23. Aksoy and Robins, 34-35. 24. Ibid, 1.
25. James McBride, "'On-scene' shows flood airwaves." *Variety*, June 3, 1991: 32.
26. Guider, 75.
27. See Graham Murdock, "Television and Citizenship: In Defence of Public Broadcasting," in A. Tomlinson, ed., *Consumption, Identity, and Style* (New York: Routledge, 1990), pp. 77-101; Paddy Scannell, "Public Service Broadcasting: The History of a Concept," in Andrew Goodwin & Gary Whannel, eds., *Understanding Television* (New York: Routledge, 1990), pp. 11-29.

28. Steve Coe, "Reality 1994," *Broadcasting and Cable*, May 9, 1994: 29-30; David Tobenkin, "Reality Still Going Strong in Syndication," *Broadcasting and Cable*, May 9, 1994: 34-5.
29. In 1991, production costs for *A Current Affair*, *Hard Copy*, *Inside Edition*, *Entertainment Tonight*, and other tabloid shows were estimated as ranging from about \$350,000 to \$500,000 per week, whereas the game shows that were their main competition (*Wheel of Fortune* and *Jeopardy*, for example) cost an estimated \$100,000 to \$150,000 per week (John Dempsey, "Hot Genre Gluts TV Market," *Variety*, June 3, 1991: 32.) Although the tabloids garner solid enough ratings, none have ever matched the audience shares drawn by the top game shows.
30. *Unsolved Mysteries*, a top ratings winner in primetime, was offered in re-edited and often updated versions for off-network syndication in the spring of 1991, but made no money for its distributor. "Reality shows have a short shelf life," one programmer notes, "they just don't seem to sell well in syndication." Another comments that watching Reali-TV reruns is like "reading yesterday's news" (Dempsey, 32). Although the networks would not have cared whether a program was attractive for syndication under the old finsyn rules, they will begin to think more like syndicators now that they are freer to control off-network syndication. That could mean a turn to fewer, or at least less topical, Reali-TV programs.
31. Debra Seagal, "Tales from the Cutting Room Floor," *Harper's Magazine* (November, 1993), pp. 50-57.
32. Mary Beth Oliver, "Portrayals of Crime, Race, and Aggression in 'Reality-Based' Police Shows: A Content Analysis," *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media* 38 (Spring, 1994): 179-92.
33. Nelson, 8.

**Table 1. Prime-Time Reali-TV Programs at the Start of 1991-92 Season**

<u>Program</u>	<u>Network</u>	<u>Mins</u>	<u>Producers</u>	<u>Deficit</u>	<u>License Fee per Episode</u>
<i>America's Funniest Home Videos</i>	ABC	30	ABC/Vin di Bona	\$0	\$375,000
<i>America's Funniest People</i>	ABC	30	ABC/Vin di Bona	\$0	\$300,000
<i>American Detective</i>	ABC	30	ABC/Orion TV/ Paul Stojanovich	\$0	\$450,000
<i>FBI: The Untold Stories</i>	ABC	30	The Arthur Co.	\$25,000	\$450,000
<i>Primetime Live</i>	ABC	60	ABC News	\$0	\$500,000
<i>20/20</i>	ABC	60	ABC News	\$0	\$500,000
<i>48 Hours</i>	CBS	60	CBS News	\$0	\$500,000
<i>Rescue 911</i>	CBS	30	CBS/Arnold Shapiro	\$0	\$650,000
<i>60 Minutes</i>	CBS	60	CBS News	\$0	\$600,000
<i>Top Cops</i>	CBS	60	CBS News	\$0	\$650,000
<i>Exposé</i>	NBC	30	NBC News	\$0	\$300,000
<i>Real Life With Jane Pauley</i>	NBC	30	NBC News	\$0	\$300,000
<i>Unsolved Mysteries</i>	NBC	60	Cosgrove-Meurer	\$0	\$800,000
<i>America's Most Wanted</i>	Fox	60	STF Productions	\$0	\$500,000
<i>Cops</i>	Fox	30	Barbour-Langley/ Fox TV Stations	\$0	\$325,000
<i>Cops II</i>	Fox	30	Barbour-Langley/ Fox TV Stations	\$0	\$325,000
<i>Totally New Totally Hidden Video</i>	Fox	30	STF Productions	\$0	\$500,000

Source: *Variety*, August 26, 1991, 48-54