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Television 10 years after

by Joe Ferullo

NCR Today

In the days right after 9/11, it was a constant refrain in the television business: nothing would ever be the same here, either. And things have changed in the decade since, but not in the way many foresaw.

Writing in the entertainment trade paper *Variety*, columnist Brian Lowry recounts that early reaction: irony was dead, seriousness would reign. I was a network news producer at NBC back then, and we all thought 9/11 signaled a sea change. How could supposed-entertainment shows with names like "Fear Factor" keep going? How could the then-emerging genre dubbed "reality television" continue in the wake of such "real" reality as 9/11? And the news: a nation obsessed for years with topics like O.J. Simpson and Michael Jackson would no doubt shake itself sober and pay attention to more important matters.

But, as Lowry writes, little of that came to pass. O.J. was replaced by, well, another O.J. trial -- this one in Las Vegas. And news-based soap operas like the Casey Anthony trial continued to dominate, along with coverage of politics that had no more depth than it did on 9/10.

Yet I've got to believe something is going on here. In the decade since the towers fell, reality television has exploded. It is considered by many critics the most escapist and most fake form of TV: ostensibly "real" people mugging for the cameras, while the strings are pulled backstage by producers looking to mold a pre-determined story. For every compelling reality drama like "Deadliest Catch" or "Coal," there are many more series focused on the various Kardashian sisters, several groups of "real housewives," and families with dozens of children.

Why does the genre thrive? I honestly don't want to over think this kind of programming, but it must be tapping into something. It may be this; before 9/11, it was okay to create and script stories; it was all right to "control" life in that manner. "Truth is stranger than fiction" because compelling fiction takes modern

life and folds it into a story that gives our experiences some shape and meaning. Fiction tells us life is not random.

Perhaps after 9/11 and Iraq and Afghanistan, all that fiction was not enough -- maybe we wanted more control over our reality, too. It was not satisfying anymore to simply say truth was stranger than fiction -- we wanted truth to be just as tidy and focused as fiction. We wanted truth to have a storyline as well.

And so audiences sit for hours, watching clearly manipulated "real" stories and "real" people -- by this point in the reality craze, we're all aware of every produced manipulation, and that is just fine by us. Manipulate away. Mold to your heart's content.

Please: shape reality, because the unformed, uncontrolled kind is sometimes just too much too bear.

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