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DENVER CENTER THEATRE COMPANY

Kent Thompson, Artistic Director

A division of The Denver Center for the Performing Arts

Conceived by Theresa Rebeck and Daniel Fish
Written by Theresa Rebeck
Directed by Daniel Fish

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Synopsis

MERV: *It's this reality show. These people, they live in this house.*
— Our House

Merv is addicted to reality TV shows. He watches them endlessly with the volume turned up. His housemates—Alice, Grigsby and Vince—do not approve, especially Alice. Meanwhile at the network, CEO Wes Mortal is seducing Jennifer Ramirez, the beautiful morning news anchor. He wants her to become the host of a reality show called "Our House," but is reminded by Stu, a producer, that hosting a reality show will undermine her credibility as a journalist. Wes is not at all concerned because the news division is constantly losing money. But back to Merv. When he is confronted by Alice about 1) eating her yogurt, 2) leaving a dirty bathroom and 3) not paying his rent, Merv goes ballistic! What follows is a surreal reality show in which Merv, his housemates and Jennifer are featured.

In this biting, witty satire on TV news and reality programs, the playwright exposes the hypocrisy of TV, the blurring of news and entertainment, and how we look at what's going on in the world.

ALICE: *Because it was like freedom, like being a free person living in America. Because there was no television.* — Our House

The Playwright: Theresa Rebeck

"I'm actually interested in poor behavior....I do believe there are monsters out there, and that they are monsters." [1]

Theresa Rebeck is an American stage, screen, television and radio writer. She has written for such TV series as "Law and Order: Criminal Intent," "Third Watch" and "LA Law." Her plays include *The Scene, The Water's Edge, Bad Dates, The Butterfly Collection, Spike Heels, Loose Knit, The Family of Mann* and *View of the Dome.* Her play *Omnium Gatherum* (2003), co-written with Alexandra Gersten-Vassilaros, was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize. She has also written a novel, *Three Girls and Their Brother*, which will be published by Random House in early 2008.

She was born in Kenwood, Ohio, near Cincinnati, and graduated from Cincinnati's Ursuline Academy in 1976. She earned her undergraduate degree from the University of Notre Dame in 1980, and followed that with three degrees from Brandeis University: an MA in 1983, an MFA in 1986 and a Ph.D in Victorian melodrama in 1989.

Doug Hughes, the director of *Mauritius*, her first play to debut on Broadway, says of Ms. Rebeck: "She does not make nice for the sake of making nice. She's a believer that pathologies and tainted motives and overreaction are important to expose." [2]

Simonson, Robert. "An Acute Interest In Bad Behavior." *New York Times.* September 23, 2007.

1. Simonson, p. 7.
2. Simonson, p. 7.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theresa_Rebeck

Reality Television

WES: *It's Reality. Why shouldn't it be news?*
—Our House

"Reality TV is a catchall category that includes a wide range of entertainment programs about real people. Sometimes called popular factual television, reality TV is located in border territories, between information and entertainment, documentary and drama," writes Cummins and Gordon in *Programming Our Lives*. [1] There are reality programs about everything and anything, from healthcare to hairdressing, from fashion to farming. The format has been sold all over the universe, with only the titles changed.

The origins of reality TV are different in each television scholars' review. Annette Hill in her book *Reality TV* believes that the genre began in tabloid journalism with "its emphasis on the personal, the sensational and the dramatic."[2] The Fox TV network is given the credit for producing "America's Most Wanted," one of the earliest reality TV shows. When Rupert Murdoch took advantage of deregulation policies during the Reagan administration and launched the Fox Network in the 1980s, he took advantage of popular journalism, especially local news. Annette Hill also claims that television documentaries contributed to the rise of reality TV. The first reality show in the modern sense was the PBS series, "An American Family." In that acclaimed program we saw a nuclear family face crises such as the divorce of the parents and the coming out of a gay son.

Precursors of the reality format include Alan

Funt's "Candid Camera" (1948), game shows such as "Beat the Clock" and "Truth or Consequences" or "A Current Affair," developed in Australia and hosted by Maury Povich. Whatever its origins, "the variety and continuing popularity of reality based programming, both in America and around the world, shows no signs of fading away." [3]

There are numerous kinds of reality shows, TV scholars report. One is the docu-soap/lifestyle genre, which is a combination of observational documentary and character-drawn dramas. The BBC's "What Not to Wear" and Bravo's "Queer Eye for the Straight Guy" would qualify. Some of these programs need a "special living environment" such as MTV's "The Real World."[4] In this show cast members, who previously did not know each other, are placed together in one house. "Temptation Island" in 2001 achieved some notoriety by placing several couples on an island surrounded by attractive single people in order to test the couples' fidelity.

Another genre is reality game shows. "Big Brother," a format originated by a Dutch corporation, locks up nine people in a house for 100 days, endlessly watched by 24 TV cameras. Once every week the audience votes against "one of the inmates who has to leave the house, until the last person to stay can be called a winner."[5] Another favorite is "Survivor," which places auditioned members on a deserted island or some other challenging environment. As Mark Burnett, its creator, described it, there would be "two tribes, challenges, a tribal council, a vote-out and a farewell comment by the evicted tribe member."[6] By the summer of 2002 reality game shows dominated the primetime TV schedule.

In the celebrity reality show, a celebrity is filmed going about his/her everyday life: examples include the late "Anna Nicole Show," "The Osbournes" and the now divorced "Newlyweds: Nick and Jessica." Incidentally, the precursor of this kind of show was Edward R. Murrow's "Person to Person."

Dating-based competition shows involve choosing one partner out of a group of suitors. Over the course of a single episode or an entire season, contestants are eliminated until the chosen one and the final suitor remain. Shows that have aired include "The Bachelor," its spin-off "The Bachelorette" and "For Love or Money."

The job search category revolves around a skill that contestants were pre-screened for. Competitors perform a variety of tasks based around that skill, are judged, and then kept or removed by an expert or experts, or audience vote-in. Examples include "The Apprentice" (business skills), "America's Next Top Model" (posing and looking good), "American Idol" (singing), "Hell's Kitchen" (cooking), and "Project Runway" (clothing design).

Self-improvement/makeover shows cover a person or persons trying to improve some aspect of their lives. A group of experts give the subjects advice, encouragement and instruction on how to better a condition. Examples are "The Biggest Loser" (weight), "Extreme Makeover" (entire physical appearance), "Supernanny" (child rearing) and "Queer Eye for the Straight Guy" (style and grooming).

The renovation show transforms a person's living space, workspace or vehicle. The British program "Changing Rooms" became the American "Trading Spaces," while others include "Extreme Makeover: Home Edition," "Designed to Sell" and "While You Were Out."

Some talk shows rank as reality TV (or trash TV) because they recruit guests who have outrageous behavior and want to display it. Programs such as "Rikki Lake" and "The Jerry Springer Show" fall in this category.

Finally, in the hoax department, the entire show is a prank played on one or more cast members who think they are appearing in a legitimate reality show. The rest of the cast (real actors) and the audience are in the know. The best example is "Joe Schmo," which premiered in 2003 followed by "My Big Fat Obnoxious Boss" (based on "The Apprentice").

There is some controversy about whether talent-search shows such as "American Idol," "Dancing with the Stars" and "America's Got Talent" are reality TV or just reincarnations of "Star Search" and "Ted Mack's Amateur Hour." The programs follow the reality competition conventions of removing contestants per episode by judges and/or audience vote-in, but there is a great deal of interaction between contestants and judges.

Reality TV proliferates and profits on all TV networks because it is cheap to produce. These programs do away with high-priced stars and union talent; agents who occupy the role of program developers and demand a fee; and, most importantly, the writers. Instead, the industry uses "nonunion, freelance production crews." [6.] In addition, "the genre has been an integral part of network strategies to control labor unrest." [7.] The writers' strike of 1988 was the year that gave rise to reality TV because it ushered in prime-time programs such as "Who Wants to be a Millionaire?" and "Survivor." The networks ordered more "reali-TV" series to prepare for potential strikes and because they had high ratings. In addition, modern technology such as hand-held cameras and available lighting made production relatively inexpensive. Reality TV attracts the 18-49 year old audience (the networks' most desirable crowd) and can be distributed worldwide. When hour-long dramas cost one million dollars per episode and half-hour situation comedies cost a half million apiece, "reali-TV programs offer considerable savings in production costs, sometimes more than 50% compared to fictional programming." [8.]

Critics of reality TV call it stupid and moronic; writers and actors abhor it because it robs them of their livelihood. The Parents' Television Council says it "wallows in some of the most explicit foul language imaginable…. It depicts real people in real—not staged—sexual situations." [9.]

Still, there are others that defend the genre. David Escoffery, editor of *How Real is Reality TV?* writes that "reality TV…shows us social interaction, group dynamics, interpersonal struggles, the process of voting, and even, perhaps, the workings of power itself." [10.] Annette Hill, author of *Reality TV*, notes that audiences are involved in "debates about cultural and social values that critics say are missing [in other programs]." [11.] Donald Trump believes "The Apprentice" teaches viewers about "the workplace within a corporation, the economy and the larger contemporary social system" amidst vilifying, brokering and back-stabbing. [12.] Finally, Allen Funt, creator of "Candid Camera," believes "covertly filmed behavior is a tool for teaching responsible citizenship on multiple scales."[13.]

"Reality shows and amateur videos dominate TV programming. It is the age of voyeurism and vicarious living….We like to watch. It is a surveillance culture."
—from James Cameron's screenplay for the movie *Strange Days.*

Andrejevic, Mark. *Reality TV: The Work of Being Watched*. New York: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2004.

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Franko, Elizabeth Michelle. "Democracy at Work? The Lessons of Donald Trump."

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Murray, Susan and Ouellette, Laurie. *Reality TV: Remaking Television Culture.* New York: New York University Press, 2004.

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Raphael, Chad. "The Political Economic Origins of Reali-TV."

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reality_TV

1. Cummins and Gordon, p. 38.
2. Hill, p. 15.
3. Escoffery, p. 21.
4. wikipedia, p. 3.
5. Hill, p. 31.
6. Raphael, p. 124.
7. Raphael, p. 125.
8. Raphael, p. 127.
9. Huff, p. 22.
10. Escoffery, p. 3.
11. Hill, p. 9.
12. Franko, p. 247.
13. McCarthy, p. 23.
14. Andrejevic, p. 65.

FEDERAL COMMUNICATIONS COMMISSION (FCC) REGULATIONS

STU: *That's the deal. They (FCC) give us the airwaves, we are required by law to present a certain number of hours a week of news coverage.*
—Our House

During the 1960s, due to the upheavals of the war in Vietnam and the Civil Rights Movement, TV news developed an unprecedented broad appeal. Networks expanded their newscasts from 15 minutes to 30 minutes and enhanced their programs with visual and narrative interest. The networks did this because of public interest, but the government owns the air. The FCC licenses frequencies on the airwaves, a public resource; in return broadcasters must meet public-service requirements and obey decency rules. In terms of its public service obligations, television and other broadcast media are required to keep the public informed, but there is no indication of how much news and when it should be broadcast. While CNN has been able to profit from its 24-hour news bonanza, other networks regularly lose money on their news programs.

The FCC is far more explicit about obscene and indecent programming, which it describes as "language or material that depicts or describes, in terms patently offensive as measured by contemporary community standards for the broadcast medium, sexual or excretory activities or organs." [1.] However, under the First Amendment, "the FCC cannot completely ban profane language or potentially offensive material unless it meets a narrow legal test for obscenity." [2.] Therefore, the FCC modified its standards and now bans indecent material from 6 A.M. to 10 P.M. when children may be watching.

According to Tim Doyle and Scott Woolley in *Forbes Magazine*, "the FCC is utterly outdated, outflanked and overwhelmed in the Internet Age." [3.] The networks still employ dozens of in-house censors to bleep any foul language or fuzz-up wardrobe malfunctions such as the Janet Jackson episode in 2004. Since that debacle, the FCC has issued indecency fines totaling $11.9 million.

JENNIFER: *Merv, there is an FCC thing about language.*
—Our House

Doyle, Tim and Woolley, Scott. "Filth and the FCC." *Forbes Magazine*. March 26, 2007.

Paulson, Ken. "Grammar Lesson: How the FCC embraced the F-word." www.firstamendmentcenter.org/commentaary/1/25/04

Whitley, Jack W. and Skall, Gregg P. *The Broadcasters' Survival Guide*. New York: Scripps Howard Books, 1998.

1. Whitley and Skall, p. 58.
2. Paulson, p. 1.
3. Doyle and Woolley, p. 1.
http://www.fcc.gov/mediagoals/

News Anchors

WES: *You're the best anchor this network has ever had. And we've had some pretty f------- respectable anchors, as I think you know.*
—Our House

"In United States television the chief news presenter(s) for network, local, cable and satellite news programming is known as the Anchor." [1.] The metaphor is borrowed, not from the nautical realm, but from the strongest runner of a relay team, the anchorman, who runs the final leg of the race. In the conventional format of news broadcasts, when the anchor is not delivering a story to the viewing audience, he or she is introducing and calling upon reporters to deliver reports from other areas. "Most importantly, an anchor represents the public and its need to know whenever he or she interrogates and listens to the subject of an interview." [2.]

Some news anchors have become household heroes. Walter Cronkite became a widely admired and "most trusted" national figure during the 1960s along with Chet Huntley and David Brinkley. The late Peter Jennings and the now retired Dan Rather, Tom Brokaw and Bernard Shaw of CNN became national celebrities and highly paid broadcasters.

Anchoring network TV news had become a male bastion until Katie Couric was hired as the permanent nightly news anchor at CBS. Previously a co-host on NBC's "Today" show, a morning entertainment and not-much-hard-news format, she was not thought of as a serious journalist. Some bloggers believe she lacks gravitas, which is "communicating a sense of dignity, seriousness and duty.… a sense of substance and depth of personality." [3.] In an interview with President Bush she was "respectfully challenging," but the interview had little impact on the news and her nightly news ratings have been declining.

But, in the long run, this incident won't matter much "because anchors and their newscasts are facing 'irrelevance'." [4.] The nightly ritual of the evening news must reinvent itself in the face of competition from Jon Stewart and his 'fake news,' podcasts, cable TV and the internet. All of journalism, not just TV newscasts, is undergoing a revolutionary change with the outcome in doubt.

JENNIFER: *And I'm here to bring that story to America. People want to know the truth.*
—Our House

http://www.museum.tv/archives/etv/A/html/A/anchor

http://childoftv.blogspot.com/2006/04

Kalb, Marvin. "Weighing Anchors." www.washingtonpost.com/content/article/2007/10/18

1. www.museum.tv, p.1.
2. www.museum.tv, p.1.
3. www.childoftv.blogspot.com
4. Kalb, p.1.

TELEVISION RATINGS

STU: *We got a seventy share.*
WES: *She's pre-empting everything!*
—Our House

When TV viewers or entertainment professionals in the United States mention "ratings," they are most often referring to the Nielsen Ratings, a system developed by Nielsen Media Research to determine the audience size and composition of television programming. The system has been updated and modified extensively since it was developed in the early 1940s by Arthur Nielsen, and has now become the primary source of audience measurement information in the television industry around the world. Since television as a business makes money by selling audiences to advertisers, the Nielsen Ratings are the single most important element in determining advertising rates, schedules and program content.

Nielsen Ratings are gathered in one of two ways: by extensive use of surveys, where viewers from various demographics are asked to keep a written record or diary of the television programs they watch throughout the day and evening or by the use of Set Meters, which are small devices connected to every television set in selected homes. These devices monitor the viewing habits of the home and transmit the information nightly to Nielsen through a 'Home Unit' connected to a phone line. Set Meter information allows market researchers to study television viewing habits on a minute-by-minute basis, seeing the exact moment viewers change channels or turn off their sets. In addition to this technology, the implementation of individual viewer reporting devices (called People Meters) allow the company to separate household viewing information into various demographic groups.

Nielsen Television Ratings are reported by ranking the percentage for each show of all viewers watching television at a given time. As of August 27, 2007, there were an estimated 112.8 million television households in the USA. A single national "ratings point" represents one percent, or 1,128,000 households for the 2006-07 season. "Share" is the percentage of television sets in use tuned to a specific program. These numbers are usually reported as ratings points/share. For example, Nielsen may report a show as receiving 9.2/15 during its broadcast, meaning that 9.2% or 10, 377, 600 households were tuned in to that particular show (the points). Additionally, 15% of all televisions in use at the time were tuned into this program (the share). Nielsen re-estimates the number of households each August for the upcoming television season.

Nielsen Media Research also provides statistics on an estimated total number of viewers and on specific demographics. Advertising rates are influenced not only by the total number of viewers, but also by particular demographics, such as age, sex, economic class and area. Younger viewers are considered the most attractive for many products such as shampoo, cosmetics, shoes and other apparel. In some cases, older and wealthier audiences are preferred. Television ratings are not an exact science, but they are a powerful force in determining the programming in an industry where millions of dollars are at stake every day.

Carter. Bill. *Desperate Networks*. New York: Doubleday, 2006.

http://www.HowStuffworks.com/Nielsen Ratings

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nielsen_Ratings

Satire

Satire is "an artistic form in which human or individual vices, follies, abuses or shortcomings are held up to censure by means of ridicule, derision, burlesque, irony or other methods, sometimes with an intent to bring about improvement."[1] Although satire is usually meant to be funny, the purpose is not primarily humor in itself so much as an angry attack on something the author or playwright feels strongly about, that uses wit as its weapon.

Quintilian of ancient Rome was the first person to use the term to describe the writings of Lucilius. In the 16th century most believed that the term satire came from the Greek "satyr," but satyrs were the companions of Dionysus and central characters of the Theatre of Ancient Greece. The style of Roman satire is linked to the word "satira" or "satira lanx" which means "a dish of fruits," "resembling colorful mockings" or, figuratively, a "medley."[2] Pliny, a Roman historian, reports that the sixth century poet Hipponax wrote satire that was so cruel that the target of his satire hanged himself.

Mark Twain was a great American satirist; his novel *Huckleberry Finn* is set in the antebellum South, where the moral values Twain wished to teach are completely turned on their heads. His hero, Huck, is a rather simple but good-hearted boy who is ashamed of his temptations to help a runaway slave. In fact his conscience—injured by the distorted moral world he has been raised in, often bothers him when he is behaving at his best. He is prepared to do good while believing that society thinks it wrong.

In the 20th century, satire was used by such writers as Aldous Huxley and George Orwell to make serious commentaries on the dangers of the sweeping social changes taking place around the world. The film, *The Great Dictator* (1940) by Charlie Chaplin, is a satire on Adolph Hitler. The film *Dr. Strangelove* (1964) is a popular satire on the Cold War. A more humorous brand of satire flourished in Great Britain in the early 1960s with the work of Peter Cook, John Cleese, Alan Bennett, Jonathan Miller, David Frost and the Monty Python bunch. Most of their work was caricature and parody and preferred to be entertainment rather than outright criticism.

Contemporary satire is illustrated by Stephen Colbert's TV program "The Colbert Report." His character is an opinionated and self-righteous commentator who, in his TV interviews, interrupts people, wags his finger at them and uses every logical fallacy ever known. In doing so, he demonstrates the principle of modern American satire: the ridiculing of the actions of politicians and other public figures by using their statements and purported beliefs against them to their furthest logical conclusion, thus revealing their hypocrisy and stupidity. In addition, the animated series "The Simpsons" and "South Park" both parody modern family and social life. As well as being deliciously humorous, they often strongly criticize politics, economic life, religion and many other aspects of American life.

1. *Encyclopedia Britannica*, p. 497.
2. Wikipedia, p. 2.

Encyclopedia Britannica. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Satire

Leslie Moonves

"As head of CBS he [Moonves] considered himself emperor of the universe."
—Design Conference Notes [1]

Our House began as an email dialogue between Theresa Rebeck and director Daniel Fish over America, the media and the situations involving Leslie Moonves and his girlfriend, Julie Chen. Moonves thought of news as a form of entertainment and the news division was in a rage about it.

Moonves was born in New York City in 1948 but grew up in Valley Stream, NY, a graduate of Valley Stream Central High School and Bucknell University. In 1968-69 he studied acting with Sanford Meisner at the Neighborhood Playhouse in New York and calls that time the greatest two years of his life. From New York he went to Hollywood where he made the rounds looking for acting work. But he quickly realized acting was not his forte; organizational and management skills were the talents at which he excelled. Moonves landed a job at Lorimar TV where he had the opportunity to develop television series. With two other producers he created a series of successful family comedy shows for ABC; two years later he developed "Friends" and "ER" for NBC.

In 1994 Moonves received a call from Laurence Tisch who had purchased CBS in 1986. He offered Moonves the job of turning around the troubled network that had low ratings and weak shows. Moonves accepted the offer and took ultimate authority over everything "from the smallest casting decisions to the closing of every big deal." [2.] Under Moonves' direction CBS developed the "CSI" franchise, "Everybody Loves Raymond," "Two and a Half Men" and "Survivor."

Today Moonves is President and Chief Executive Officer of CBS corporation. He resides in the hills above Brentwood, California with his new wife, Julie Chen.

Design Conference Notes. *Our House*. June 4, 2007.

Carter, Bill. *Desperate Networks*. New York: Doubleday. 2006.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Leslie_Moonves

1. Design Conference Notes, p. 1.
2. Carter, p. 45.

Julie Chen

Julie Chen is an American TV personality, news anchor, journalist, producer and wife of Leslie Moonves, CEO at CBS.

Chen's mother was born in Burma and her father in China, but the family fled to Taiwan and finally New York. Julie was born in Queens, NY in 1970 where she attended public school. In 1987 she graduated from St. Francis Prep High School and then attended the University of Southern California where she graduated in 1991 with a major in broadcast journalism and English. While still in school she worked for "ABC NewsOne" for one season as a desk assistant. She was subsequently promoted to work as a producer for the next three years. From 1995-97 she worked as a news anchor for WDIN-TV in Dayton, Ohio.

From 1999 to 2002, Chen was the anchor of both early morning shows, "CBS Morning News" and "The Early Show," alongside Bryant Gumbel and Jane Clayson. Since 2000, she has also been the host of the American version of "Big Brother." During the first season she was widely criticized in the media for her heavily scripted, wooden delivery in her interaction with the studio audience and in the interviews on the live programs. This led to her earning the nickname "Chenbot" among the internet bloggers and fans of the show. She takes no offense at the term, adding that it may derive from her "precise on-air style." [1.]

1. wikipedia, p. 1.
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Julie_Chen

News vs. Entertainment

RATHER: *He [Moonves] is head of CBS news.*
ASMAN: *He's head of the whole thing—*
RATHER: *Yes.*
ASMAN: *Both entertainment and news. And you think the line between the two is disappearing?*
RATHER: *I think it has disappeared.*[1]

In an interview on MSNBC's "Morning Joe" show, Dan Rather declared Leslie Moonves, CEO of CBS, "doesn't know about news." [2.] He continued his attack on Moonves by indicating Moonves believes TV news is for audiences over the age of 60, and if the format is not changed "the evening news will die." [3.]

Rather, a tough journalist in the mold of Walter Cronkite and Tom Brokaw, differentiated between substantive, serious nightly newscasts and the lighter, feel-good morning shows that deal in recipes, runway fashions and child rearing. Rather feels Moonves doesn't know what news is, only entertainment. To illustrate his point, he spoke of Moonves' comment about "blowing up the CBS news division." [4.] *The Washington Post* columnist Tom Shales defended Rather when he wrote: "[He] wonders what will happen to a nation addicted to fake news, celebrity gossip and pop-star prattle—when people abandon the very virtues of being informed and instead insist on constant titillation from TV." [5.]

Rather was attacked for being sexist when he accused Moonves of "dumbing down and tarting up" the CBS evening news when new anchor Katie Couric was hired. He was also dogged by controversy surrounding his discredited report about President Bush's military service. Convinced that the news division was weak, Moonves was particularly displeased when the news division pre-empted the end of "CSI: NY" to report the death of Yassir Arafat. Moonves is at home with Hollywood stars, but never felt comfortable with the news division. "To him, the place still had a special aura, forged by legends like Edward R. Murrow, Walter Cronkite, Mike Wallace and Rather." [6.] He believed that the people at CBS news felt they were superior to everyone in the entertainment division. Therefore, he did little about the lowly state of CBS news because it was not a priority for him.

WES: *Staying informed in America is optional….*
It's not required to watch the evening news.
—Our House

Carter, Bill. *Desperate Networks*. New York: Doubleday, 2006.

Heffner, Alexander.
http://www.cjr.org/behind_the_news/tv_news_gone_soft

"TV News Gone Soft?"
Sutel, Seth. "Rather Drops Anchor on CBS Chief." *Rocky Mountain News.* 6/13/07.

1. Heffner, p. 1.
2. Sutel, p. 12.
3. Sutel, p. 12.
4. Heffner, p. 2.
5. Heffner, p. 2.
6. Carter. p. 316.

TV News and Hostage Crises

JENNIFER: *He asked for me, Wes. He didn't ask for Katie or Diane or Lesley Stahl, God help her.*
—Our House

In the play Merv calls for Jennifer as he holds Vince and the wounded Grigsby and Alice hostages. This kind of situation happens periodically; a dangerous suspect, sometimes with hostages, wants to talk to a representative of the news media before surrendering. These incidents raise the question of how much a news organization should report during an on-going police action when there are lives at stake.

Today, journalists have to assume a hostage-taker is watching TV, listening to the radio or even surfing the Internet. If the television cameras focus on a SWAT team crawling toward a barricaded suspect, it can make for compelling television, but can also endanger the lives of police officers and hostages. "As technological advances in broadcasting equipment make it easier for TV to go live instantly, and as competitive pressures loom larger, journalists face tough ethical questions on what to show during a high stakes crisis." [1.] Too often, producers under pressure focus on what their high-tech equipment can accomplish, rather than considering the plight of the participants. They should ask themselves two questions: "What does the public need to know and when do they need to know it?" [2.]

The Poynter Institute, an organization for making better journalists, posts an article by Al Tompkins titled "Guidelines for 'Taking It Live'". In the column he lists some questions journalists should ask themselves before broadcasting a live confrontation. They include:

"Beyond competitive factors, what are your motivations for 'going live'?

"What are the consequences short-term and long-term of going on the air with the information?

"Are you prepared to air the worst possible outcome that could result from this unfolding story?

"How clearly does the technical crew at your TV station understand the newsrooms' standard for graphic content?

"What factor does the time of day play in your decision to cover a breaking event?" [3.]

Most law enforcement personnel urge using common sense and caution in order to save lives. The police can't tell reporters what to do, but they can give guidance. The relationship between journalists and law enforcement has often been testy. Because of the widespread use of live reporting, the media and police should discuss potential situations and have an understanding of each other's needs.

Bob Steele of the Poynter Institute gives some advice to journalists covering an ongoing crisis situation. He writes: "Fight the urge to become a player in any standoff, hostage situation or terrorist incident. Journalists should become personally involved only as a last resort and with the explicit approval of trained hostage negotiators on the scene." [4.]

Unfortunately, Jennifer did not heed this advice before she became a part of Merv's twisted reality show.

http://ajr.org/Article_asp?id=518

http://www.poynter.org/dg.Its/id5558/content.content_view.htm

http://www.tvrundown.com/xhostage.htm

1. AJR.org, p. 3.
2. AJR.org, p. 3.
3. www.poynter.org, p. 1.
4. www.poynter.org, p. 2

Questions & Activities

Questions

1) What is the difference between a reality program and the news?
2) How do the four housemates, Alice, Grigsby, Merv, and Vince feel about television? Does their view change through the play?
3) How do relationships change between the housemates?
4) Why are the people in the news division upset that their news anchor, Jennifer, will also be hosting a reality show?
5) Why do people watch the news? List the reasons that Stu gives to Wes.
6) What happens in the play that leads up to the argument between Alice and Merv?
7) Why does Merv want to be interviewed by Jennifer Ramirez? Why is Merv happy about being covered by the news?
8) Why does Merv think it is so cheap to kill people?
9) What does Jennifer do to keep the story a news item?
10) Why does Wes think television is God?
11) If you were in Wes's position, would you allow Jennifer to cover the story? Explain why you would or would not.

Activities

Newspaper Writer -
a) Before the performance
Materials: Articles from newspapers or from the internet; paper and pencil

1) Students will take a few articles from a newspaper and investigate what makes a story newsworthy.
2) After reading a selected article, students write a short summary about the article.
3) Below the summary, students then create a list of reasons why they were interested in the article.
4) Students create a list of reasons why they believe the article was important and who else may find the article compelling.

b) After the performance

1) Students will write an article about what has transpired on stage. This is not to be confused with a review of the performance.
2) Start by writing an article about what happened in the room between Merv and the roommates and continue the article by describing what happened when Jennifer entered.
3) Remember to answer who, what, when, where, why and how.

CO Model Content Standards
Reading and Writing 4: Students apply thinking to their reading, writing, speaking, listening, and viewing.
Reading and Writing 5: Students read to locate, select, and make use of relevant information from a variety of media, reference, and technological sources.

Journalism Ethics

Part I: Before the performance

1) The group is split into three groups and is assigned a question to each group to answer. Groups will have about 60 seconds to construct and support their arguments.

2) Each group is on the staff of the school newspaper and must decide if they should place the article in the paper.

Group Questions

1) The football team is preparing for a game. The starting quarterback has been accused of cutting classes. Although the quarterback had a written note excusing him for the absence, your source has revealed that it is a forgery. If you release the story, the team will have to suspend the quarterback for the game and will probably lose.

a. Does the question become more difficult to answer, if the reporter's source is unreliable or the backup quarterback is the source?

b. The game is for the championship game rather than a regular game?

2) Your friend has revealed that they have a copy of the notoriously difficult chemistry final exam. If you turn them in, they will be expelled from school and lose their college scholarship. No one knows that there is copy of the exam and there is no way that they will be caught.

b. What if the friend is your best friend?

c. What if this friend is your brother or sister?

3) Your friend has won the election for student body president. However, you have information that the election was rigged and the principal had changed the results. If you print the article, your friend will lose the election.

a. You were the one responsible for the miscount, and the principal is protecting your mistake.

b. The principal will also lose their job and the principal is your mother.

Part II: After the Performance

1) The group is split into two sides. One side is going to support Jennifer and Wes and the other side is going to support Stu.

2) Compile a list to support your argument.

3) The questions to debate are:

a. Should Jennifer who is already the news anchor report the happenings on the reality show, "Our House?"

b. Should Jennifer be sent into the hostage situation?

c. Should Jennifer solve the hostage situation?

CO Model Content Standards

Civics 2.4: Students know how public policy is developed at the local, state, and national levels.

Civics 4.4: Students know how citizens can participate in civic life.