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## Teaching the Lineage of Televisual Control and Reality TV

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# Teaching the Lineage of Televisual Control and Reality TV

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## Overview

Since its exponential rise in commercial popularity in the 1950s, televisual technologies have been part of various arrangements of information dissemination, entertainment, shared experience, cultural unity, coercion, and control. As explained by Ouellette and Hay, television is a cultural technology, an “object of regulation, policy, and programs designed to nurture citizenship and civil society, and an instrument for educating, improving, and shaping objects” (2008, 14). In particular, the authors examine reality television in a context of neoliberal governance—with emphasis on how reality TV depicts the virtues of privatization, personal responsibility, and consumer choice in showing viewers how to “empower” themselves privately (Ouellette and Hay 2008). While “watching television” has evolved in a landscape of streaming media, time-shifting, digital dissemination, and greater audience fragmentation, reality TV-style content remains as critical than ever across various cable, streaming, and social media platforms.

These lesson plans detail a two-day unit designed to teach a brief history of the televisual with attention to the technology as part of regimes of liberal and neoliberal governance, or control at a distance (Ouellette and Hay 2008; Foucault 1989). The first of two days functions to contextualize televisual history beginning with early television as part of a reconfiguration of domestic space with roots in technologies of modernity. This first session also works to situate television as a critical technology of social control. The second session focuses on reality television as content that espouses more contemporary neoliberal values of personal responsibility and betterment through capitalist engagement. Taken together, this unit of classes is designed to teach students media history and theory through the example of the television, engage with historical and contemporary forms of sociotechnical control, and relate these scholarly concepts to contemporary examples students interact with on a daily basis.

## Rationale

The following lesson plans function to teach a number of related concepts that include the contemporary televisual and streaming media, societies of control, the relationship between neoliberalism and media, and reality television. As such, this rationale section provides a brief overview of some key sources for these concepts, as well as some sources that can assist in teaching these course sections or expanding these weeks for graduate coursework.

### ***Contemporary televisual and streaming media***

It is impossible to discuss contemporary television without the addition of streaming media. Streaming platforms such as Netflix, Hulu, and Amazon Prime, along with smaller competitors, often frame their service as part of the lineage of television. Due to discursive positionings such

as these, it should be unsurprising that streaming distributors have been construed as part of a linear evolution of the televisual. As Jenner explains, television history itself is commonly divided into periods of TVI, TVII, and TVIII, leaving some to wonder whether streaming media represents a TVIV (2014, 258-260).

**Figure 1:** Televisual periodizations. Adapted from Jenner 2014.

TV Periods	Years	Characterization
TVI	mid 1950s to early 1980s	Channel scarcity, mass audience, three-network hegemony
TVII	early 1980s-late 1990s	Channel/network expansion, quality television, network branding strategies
TVIII	late 1990s to present	Proliferating digital platforms, further audience fragmentation, shift in commodity relations

Jenner, however, rejects these rigid discursive periodizations, arguing that streaming television such as Netflix should not be conceived of as TVIV, but instead as matrix media, “where viewing patterns, branding strategies, industrial structures, the way different media forms interact with each other or the various ways content is made available shift completely away from the television set” (2014, 260). Here, the materiality of media and use practices complicate established definitions and disrupt linear histories of the televisual.

Overall, contemporary forms of the televisual are quite different from the three-channel landscape of early broadcasting; streaming, time-shifting, digital dissemination, and greater audience fragmentation necessitate reconsideration of what “watching television” means. Despite these transformations, scholars note that since its inception, television has been part of arrangements with logics that work toward control of the subject and the structuring of public and domestic spaces (Hay 2001; McCarthy 2001; Spigel 2005). The additions of digitization, data-collection, and algorithmic suggestion via streaming media necessitate continued examination of the relationship between the televisual and the individual. While these material relationships of content creation, dissemination, immaterial labor, spatiality, etc. are important, it is critical to examine the lasting relevance of televisual content as well.

### ***Control society***

Important to understanding how reality television fits within a broader theme of control is scholarship on the form and machinations of control over time. Astutely broken down by Galloway, the three key periods of control are commonly divided into sovereign society, disciplinary society, and control society (2004).

**Figure 2:** The societies of control. Adapted from Galloway 2004.

Period	Machine	Dates	Diagram	Manager
Sovereign Society	Simple mechanical machines	March 2, 1757 (Foucault)	Centralization	Hierarchy
Disciplinary Society	Thermodynamic machines	May 24, 1844 (telegraph); 1942 (Manhattan Project)	Decentralization	Bureaucracy
Control Society	Cybernetic machines, computers	February 28, 1953 (Watson and Crick); January 1, 1983 (TCP/IP)	Distribution	Protocol

Relevant to the televisual are both disciplinary and control societies. In disciplinary society, individuals are expected to punish themselves— “to preemptively discipline their own bodies such that the power of punishment originated ultimately from within, not from some outside force” (Galloway, 2004, 21). Foucault’s work on prisons (1995), sexuality (1990), madness (1971), and pedagogy (1988) each detail aspects of this shift. Galloway continues this lineage with an examination of contemporary computational control society, in which protocol or “the standards governing the implementation of specific technologies,” is the technique of achieving voluntary regulation (2004, 4).

Television is media form that has been studied as part of lineages of control. For example, Hay examines the importance of audio-visual media forms to the evolution of urban space and regimes of liberal control (2011). For Hay, “the new media city became the object of liberal programs and policies (a recent rationality and arrangement of liberal government) oriented toward a new regime of urban renewal” (2011, 121). Specifically, Hay (2011) connects the televisual city and mass suburbanization with urban renewal, mobility and privacy, and the promise of future resettling of urban space by suburbanites and tourists.

### ***Neoliberalism***

In situating reality television in a contemporary context it is important for students to understand what is meant by “neoliberalism.” Scholarship differs on the specific starting date, but generally points to the deregulation of corporate interests, as well as the privatization of government-run sectors in the late 1970s and early 1980s as the shift to what is commonly called neoliberal capitalism or neoliberalism. Though it is important to avoid being overly broad when defining a historical era, scholarship on neoliberalism often notes the common threads of a decline in profitability, concentration of capital, deregulation, and rise of multinational corporations (Huws 2014; Srnicek 2017; Schiller 2000). Accompanying these political-economy shifts is the altered role of the State itself in neoliberalism. As explained by Harvey, the neoliberal State must work to protect the so-called natural order of the market by ensuring deregulation, even at the cost of a contradictory authoritarian turn that preserves corporate power under the guise of “hands-off” government policies (2005). Hardt and Negri add the trends of new migration patterns driven by international flows of capital and production, a shift in the composition of the labor force, new forms of biopolitical control through the blurred boundaries of labor and social life, and the expropriation of public wealth (2009). Taken

together, neoliberalism is as much of an alteration as it is an intensification of capitalism, where the state itself becomes subservient to corporate interests under the pretext that policies of deregulation create a more level playing field for individuals around the globe.

### ***Reality television***

Ouellette and Hay (2008) place reality television in a context of neoliberal governance—specifically the virtues of privatization, personal responsibility, consumer choice, personal empowerment. Reality television is part of the evolution of liberal government—a governmental rationality or approach to governing through freedom (Ouellette and Hay, 2008, 9). Here, both liberalism and neoliberalism’s paradox is that it advocates governance through freedom, but expects citizen self-regulation. For Ouellette and Hay (2008), this control operates differently in various televisual periods.

The first of four periods, the emergence of broadcasting in the United States, represented more centralized control, as state-supported radio and television function as technologies that reinforced territorial expansion, global connection, and mass suburbanization. By the mid 1940s, television content was far less indebted to the state, with more focus on the rationality of liberal governance. Here, the moral and ethical demonstrations via popular television functioned to guide citizenship. Noted by Ouellette and Hay (2008), this transition highlights the paradox of television as public service versus the desire to avoid state bureaucracy. In the 1970s, the proliferation of cable and satellite channels allowed for greater viewing flexibility and consumer choice. This enhanced selection of programming empowered cultural collectives in shaping lifestyle clusters and citizenships, with television programs representing particular lifestyles. Material technological advances beginning with VCR allowed individuals greater control and temporal flexibility in viewing televisual programs. It is in this historical moment that entrepreneurialism and self-responsibility become central to television’s governing role (Ouellette & Hay, 2008). Finally, it is in the contemporary televisual that the TV network becomes not just one relay in various communication networks but an “integral relay within entrepreneurial networks of welfare provision and private state support” (Ouellette & Hay, 2008, 31). In this landscape television’s role is transformed. Different from the logics of previous televisual time periods, “Citizenship is less an objective or outcome of TV’s ideological work on subjects than an achievement that depends on the TV programs through which one actively enters into these networks” (31). Exemplified for Ouellette and Hay (2008) by reality television, neoliberal control is accomplished by emphasizing the virtues of self-responsibility, appropriate behavior, and capitalist actions.

Other scholarly examinations emphasize the tension between the so-called democratized content that is reality TV and the monetization of reality programming. Explained by Andrejevic (2004), reality TV, “offers a somewhat different and more cynical version of democratization, one whereby producers can deploy the offer of participation as a means of enticing viewers to share in the production of a relatively inexpensive and profitable entertainment product” (6). Furthermore, reality television functions as part of new forms of surveillance. Reality TV encourages a culture of sharing that includes divulging shopping, viewing, lifestyle, and

movement habits. At the same time, “by providing information about ourselves, we supply valuable inputs to the production process and thereby help to shape it” (Andrejevic, 2004, 6). Andrejevic’s own Marxist orientation emphasizes how reality TV as part of a larger reorganization of labor, leisure, consumption, production, and watching (p. 8). Related to this focus, Bratich (2006) examines how reality TV programs compose, decompose, and mobilize subjects toward malleability and new conditions of sovereignty (p. 66). Accordingly, reality television is imbricated with forms of televisual control, neoliberal subjectivation, and novel forms of extracting value from viewers.

Similarly, Ouellette and Hay chart a changing rationality of liberal governance and the role of television (and reality television programs) in demonstrating forms of control. This includes reality television helps solve the paradox of liberalism—governing at a distance versus the simultaneous desire to shape the individual’s subjectivity to abide by certain rules (increasingly subservient to the free-market ideology of neoliberalism). Techniques of self-improvement via interaction with the market and desired changes are promised to lead to happiness. Entrepreneurial guidance via TV replaces the role of the State as mechanism for “free” individuals to govern themselves.

### ***Purpose, design, and lesson context***

As previously mentioned, the purpose of this lesson plan is twofold. The first day endeavors to introduce and contextualize the technology of television in conjunction with the social context in which it emerged. This involves taking into account the television as part of changing arrangements of domestic and public contexts, gender roles, and urban/suburban migration. The second day focuses on reality TV as a form of decentralized neoliberal control. Accordingly, this unit of classes is designed to teach students media history and theory through the example of the television, engage with historical and contemporary forms of sociotechnical control, and relate these scholarly concepts to contemporary examples with which students regularly interact.

These lessons are adapted from a Media History and Theory course designed for communication majors pursuing a communication media concentration. This particular course begins with the telegraph as a critical electrical technology that marks the separation of communication and transportation (Carey 1989) and then moves through communication technology milestones of the telephone, early optical technologies, cinema, television, etc. As such, this unit is roughly midway through the course. Media History and Theory is one of the foundational courses to the communication and media concentration, so students are typically sophomores or juniors. While the readings are challenging, it is my experience that students are able to effectively grasp the course concepts through a mixture of the initial reading, lecture, and activities.

These lesson plans could easily be adapted to or used in other media theory and technology history courses. Classes oriented toward the history of the televisual could utilize a similar lesson plan structure or add classes to this unit. Moreover, the theoretical concepts of this unit

are those often found in media theory courses. Finally, it is possible to utilize some of the aforementioned readings in addition to the assigned choices to produce graduate courses such as control society, early televisual, mobile media, and spatial materialism weeks.

### **General Timeline**

This set of lesson plans are designed for a two-day course unit. Lesson plans are ideally suited for 75 minute course sessions, but could be adapted for 50 minute sessions or extended for 90 minute sessions.

### **Detailed Lesson Plan**

#### **Day One: Control and televisual history**

*Before class: Assign Domestic Ideals and Family Amusements: From the Victorians to the Broadcast Age, Spiegel*

*During Class: Lecture and discussion*

#### *General Objectives and Desired Outcomes*

At the end of the lesson, students should be able to:

1. Explain the transformation of the domestic space of home in conjunction with technological adoptions and evolutions.
2. Define what Williams (1974) means by mobile privatization.
3. Examine the early televisual as part of control society.
4. Contextualize the rise of mass society, mass culture, and mass media as well as some of the key concerns of theorists at the time.

#### **Lecture “The Rise of Televisual Culture”**

The goal of this lecture is to situate reality television as part of a lineage of televisual culture. Lynn Spigel’s excellent history of early television helps to document the adoption of the technology in conjunction with changing relations of public and private, gender roles, and domesticity.

In this lecture, attention should be paid to the Victorian household and the construction of space. Spigel notes the conflict between Victorian and progressive leisure time, as the rise of the middle class in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was accompanied by the upheaval in gender roles, a shift in the boundaries between public and private, and changing morality. Key from a technological perspective is the introduction of new technologies to the home, including the radio in the 1920s and the television in the 1950s.

The adoption of electrical technologies and a changing domesticity leads into a focus on the televisual and mass society. Explained by Spigel, “the ownership of a television signified the leveling of class differences that television would come to represent in the postwar era” (2010, 31). As this class session is dedicated to placing television in historical context, it is important to emphasize the fluctuating landscape of the United States in the 1950s, including the post-World War II economic boom, along with urbanization and suburbanization. [The History Channel’s three-minute facts about the 1950s](#) is a quick way to help students comprehend the rapidly shifting domestic, commercial, social, and scientific landscape of the time. Overall, the emphasis should fall on mass production and consumption of goods as part of a new “mass culture.” This is accompanied by the rise of culture industries (print, radio, film, music, TV), cultural products designed for mass appeal, and branding and advertising strategies.

Returning to Spigel, it is key to explain the relation between mass culture, new domesticity, and the separation between public and private. Radio and later television brought families together inside the home instead of outside. Noted by Spigel, “The new domestic ideal rewarded the technologically liberated housewife with the practice promise of pleasure and recreation” (2010, 22). Within this new mass culture, products are marketed as family pastimes, including promise of labor-saving appliances. This new sociotechnical landscape is also relevant to control, in that “as labor-reducing technologies became more popular, middle-class women devoted more time to their children, providing stimulating pastimes through which they could grow into moral and healthy adults” (Spigel, 2010, 27). The rise of mass culture lays the groundwork for the coming focus on reality television as providing yet another technological reinforcement to how the individual is supposed to live and comport oneself.

This lecture should also acknowledge the canonical work of Raymond Williams on television. Williams’ work emphasizes mobile privatization—an all-at-once mobile and home-centered way of life. For Williams, families became more isolated in the 1950s, but also needed new forms of contact from outside the home—the television and broadcasting emerged to serve these complex needs and pressures. Accordingly, within the broadcasting model is a deep contradiction of centralized transmission and privatized reception (Williams 1974, 24). Williams’ work reinforces the outcomes of the lesson plan, in that to understand technology is to consider its place in an existing social formation.

Overall, the goal of this lesson plan is to examine the construction of the family and televisual control. Spigel’s chapter is important in placing television not as the sole determinant of cultural change, but instead as one critical component of a reconfiguring public and private relations beginning in the late 1800s. Spigel elucidates that “popular discourses on television were organized around the social hierarchies of family life and the divisions of spheres that had been the backbone of domestic ideology since the Victorian era” (2010, 35). The televisual reinforced this changing domesticity, as “Popular media also participated in the cultural revitalization of domesticity, taking the white, middle-class suburban home as their favored model of family bliss” (Spigel, 2010, 33). The 1950s placed enormous faith in family life via the nuclear family and the private suburban home. Recreation was held at a premium, and television was the most important among these new family activities. Consequently, the story



of television is a story of control—the reconfiguration of public and private, changing family dynamics, along with new gender roles, family expectations, mobility, and communication. Furthermore, the images of the white, suburban, nuclear family form an early link between televisual representation and control of the subject. This sets up context for the contemporary era of reality television for the next class session.

### ***Discussion Questions***

1. Do we still have mass media?
  - a. How is contemporary media similar/different to the mass media of the 1950s-1970s?
2. Do we still have mass culture?
  - b. How contemporary mass culture similar/different to the mass culture of the 1950s-1970s?
3. Does the private space of the living room and the home still matter when it comes to television (whatever television still means to us)?
4. Is there still an image of the family when it comes to television (or streaming, mobile streaming, etc.)? How has the relationship between the television and the family changed?
5. How might we see a relationship between contemporary televisual/streaming technologies and gender roles?

### **Day Two: Better Living Through Reality TV**

*Before class: Assign TV Interventions: Personal Responsibility and Techniques of the Self, Ouellette and Hay*

*Students responsible for watching an episode of reality TV before class (suggestions provided in Teaching Materials section)*

*During class: Lecture, activity, and discussion*

*General objectives and desired outcomes*

At the end of the lesson, students should be able to:

1. Understand an overview of control throughout history
2. Define network models and how control is relevant to these models
3. Conceptualize what is meant by the term “neoliberalism”
4. Explain how reality TV demonstrates “control at a distance”

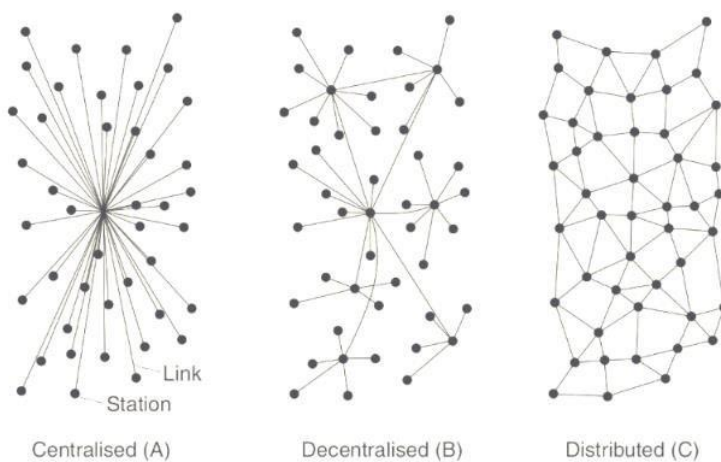
### ***Lecture “Better living through reality TV”***

This second-of-two lectures continues with the themes of the first session, with particular attention to televisual control and reality television. The lecture briefly contextualizes histories of control and neoliberalism before spending the majority of the time on recent forms of reality

television and contemporary examples of how “reality” content exists in digital, social, and mobile forms.

In explaining the histories of control, it is worth quickly examining the relationship between historical period and network model. In the sovereign society, control existed through the rule of force and a centralized network model. In the mid 1700s-early 1800s, sovereign control gave way to more decentralized control via various institutions, which include the school, prison, factory, etc. (Foucault 1971; 1988; 1989; 1990; 1995). Finally, contemporary control is computational and decentralized (Deleuze, 1992; Galloway, 2004). Diagrams are useful in this portion of the lecture.

**Figure 3:** Network models. Adapted from Galloway 2004.



Contextualizing contemporary control and Hay and Ouellette’s work on reality television also involves briefly defining neoliberalism. Neoliberalism generally refers to shifts occurring in late 1970s/early 1980s, marked by the deregulation of corporate interests, privatization of government run sectors, decline in profitability, concentration of capital, and rise of multinational corporations (Huws 2014; Srnicek 2017; Schiller 2000). Additionally, there are congruences to these neoliberal policies, which include new migration patterns driven by international flows of capital, the gutting of “safety nets” and welfare programs, and the expropriation of what was previously public wealth. Specific to the reality television focus of this class period is that under neoliberalism, the individual expected to be responsible for self. Reality television functions as part of new forms of biopolitical control through the blurred boundaries of labor and social life.

Ouellette and Hay position reality television in a context of neoliberal governance. The authors note the connection between reality television content and the virtues of privatization, personal responsibility, and consumer choice and the way reality TV shows citizens how to “empower” themselves privately. Critical to the transition between the televisual history explained in the previous lesson plan and the contemporary landscape of reality television is the transformation of the goals and logics of television. Exemplified by reality television,

neoliberal control is accomplished by emphasizing the virtues of self-responsibility, appropriate behavior, and capitalist actions.

After going over the goals of Ouellette and Hay's work, it is possible to showing some short clips of reality television programs (see "Teaching Materials" below for possibilities). This allows for student engagement, as well as the ability to discuss the relationship between reality TV and the self. Reality TV often offers life intervention programs that mobilize a variety of experts to coach individuals through personal hurdles. These programs draw from a legacy of social work as part of the liberal State but work within a new logic of self-entrepreneurialism and commerce. It is here that reality TV works to solve a paradox of liberalism—control is taught via programs that are not officially associated with the government. These programs draw on Foucault's "techniques of the self" — "methods of working on and caring for the self as a matter of one's obligation to the self" (Ouellette and Hay 2008, 75). This is a place to reengage with the overarching relationship between models of control, neoliberalism, and reality TV.

Finally, it is worth examining the goals of reality TV in terms of democratization, monetization, and making the subject productive. It is relevant to include the work Andrejevic, who explains that reality TV offers participation as strategy of monetizing viewers. Moreover, reality TV has been theorized as a new form of surveillance, where users are increasingly expected to divulge personal information. This information is subsequently collected and used as valuable input to the production process. For example, streaming platforms and how they collect user data to make new programs based on user preferences. Other relevant examples that helps transition into the relationship between reality TV and contemporary mobile and social media are targeted advertisements on social media. Reality TV as part of a larger reorganization of labor, leisure, consumption, production, and watching (Andrejevic, 2004, 8). This has consequences for the expectations for the subject and how are we expected to behave, watch, participate, divulge in new forms.

Some contemporary examples of streaming and social media content that continues the lineage of reality TV and control include Instagram influencers and YouTube stars. It is possible to ask students how this "reality-style" content follows some of the same goals of reality TV and how they interact with these new forms of reality content in their daily lives.

Overall, Ouellette and Hay's chapter is relevant in charting a changing rationality of liberal governance and the role of television (and reality television programs) in enacting this control. This includes reality television helps solve the paradox of liberalism—governing at a distance and minimal official government with the desire to shape the individual's subjectivity to abide by certain rules. These techniques of self-improvement are accomplished via interaction with the market and desired changes are promised to lead to happiness. As such, entrepreneurial guidance via TV replaces the role of the State as mechanism for "free" individuals to govern themselves.

### **Activity**

In the following activity, students will work in groups to discuss their own reality television viewing experience, examine the forms of “control at a distance” they noticed in their viewings, and then work to provide a taxonomy of control that can be shared with the class.

1. First, break students into groups of 3-5 depending on class size.
2. Have students take roughly ten minutes to discuss the following:
  - a. What reality television program and episode did they watch?
  - b. How do they see elements of control in the program? What type of behaviors and values are depicted as positive/negative? How might these observations connect to Ouellette and Hay?
3. How can we begin to define the types of reality TV with attention to control? How would you group some of the programs you watched with other reality TV?
4. After this brief discussion, groups will utilize a free diagraming program to create a visual representation of what they found.
  - a. Easy to use suggestions include: Coggle.it, Gliffy, and Lucid Chart, but way that students can quickly create a visual representation of their reality TV taxonomy that could be shared as part of the mini discussion works well.

### ***Discussion Questions***

1. How did your group define the types of reality TV?
2. How do we see forms of neoliberal control through the reality TV examples we viewed?
3. What are some positive aspects of these episodes?
4. What are some of the key downsides and dangers of these episodes?
5. How might we see new forms of reality content via streaming, mobile, and social media that fall into or challenge the legacies of control at a distance?

### **Teaching materials**

Ouellette, Laurie, and James Hay. “TV Interventions: Personal Responsibility and Techniques of the Self.” In *Better Living through Reality TV: Television and Post-welfare Citizenship*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2008.

Spigel, Lynn. “Domestic Ideals and Family Amusements: From the Victorians to the Broadcast Age.” In *Make Room for TV: Television and the Family Ideal in Postwar America*. Chicago, IL: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2010.

*Reality TV viewing suggestions via Netflix:* Queer Eye, Tidying Up with Marie Kondo, The Apartment, Fit for Fashion, The Big Family Cooking Showdown, Back with the Ex, Nailed It, Chef vs. Science, Flinch, I Own Britain’s Best Home, Cheapest Weddings, Girls Incarcerated, Diva Brides, Doomsday Preppers

*Reality TV viewing suggestions via Hulu:* Love Island, Jersey Shore, 90 Day Fiancé, Survivor, The Bachelorette, Real Housewives, Married at First Sight, My 600-lb Life, Naked and Afraid,

America's Got Talent, The Amazing Race, Hoarders, Project Runway, Intervention, Beyond Scared Straight, Dr. Pimple Popper, House Hunters, Cutthroat Kitchen, Tiny Luxury

*Reality TV viewing suggestions via Amazon Prime Instant Video:* Hoarding Buried Alive, Married at First Sight, America's Next Top Model, Nightwatch, Dates from Hell, The Amazing Race, Ramsay's Kitchen Nightmares, The Simple Life, Til Debt Do Us Part, What Not to Wear, My Strange Addiction, Pawn Stars

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Dr. Justin Grandinetti is an assistant professor at the University of North Carolina Charlotte. He completed his PhD from North Carolina State University's Communication, Rhetoric, and Digital Media program. Justin is a critical media studies scholar interested in mobile media; specifically, Justin's dissertation takes a media archaeological approach to examining the film and televisual lineage of mobile streaming media, as well as how contemporary mobile streaming practices are part of the production of space and the subject. Additionally, his work has appeared in *Surveillance and Society*, *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, and *Information, Communication, and Society*.

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