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ENTERTAINING SOCIAL EXPERIMENTS

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Abstract: This article explores how "social experiments" and entertaining "studies" have informed the making of Reality TV in conception, design, and rhetorical justification as it identifies the influential roles of particular producers: Stanley Milgram's infamous "obedience" study; Allen Funt's *Candid Camera*; and Mark Burnnett's *Survivor*. Highlighting these individuals and related practices helps to not only inform a critique of the more problematic methods of particular programing but it also suggests a way to correct if not prevent the most egregious, such as deceiving participants about all or even part of a producer's intentions. It almost goes without saying that a number of Reality TV shows have clearly misled, misrepresented, and even exploited its participants, young and old. In the end, the article argues for implementing a kind of "Institutional Review Board" to vet Reality TV programs and set specific guidelines.

Keywords: Reality TV, Popular Culture, *Candid Camera*, *Survivor*, Social Experiments, U.S. Media History.

> *They say I haven't proved anything about human nature because I've used absurd conditions. But an engineer doesn't test a new model car by just idling the engine; he puts it though its paces under extreme conditions. Professors don't examine a Ph.D. candidate by asking him the time of day; they ask him the most subtle and involved questions he can possibly be expected to answer. And in testing human behavior, you don't apply just gentle routine stimuli, for all you'll get is simple, stereotyped responses. If you want to know what holds a man together, or how well he is held together, you apply a real jolt and see where the cracks appear.*
>
> – Allen Funt, creator of *Candid Camera*

> *I've often said my shows are metaphors for life. … How [the participants] relate to others during the stress of [the show] becomes a lesson on how to optimally interact with family and coworkers.*
>
> – Mark Burnett, producer of *Survivor* and creator of *The Apprentice*

When the major U.S. networks announced their fall 2007 programming, CBS's *Kid Nation* received a great deal of the critical attention. The thirteen-episode show was described as "a bold social experiment in which CBS abandons 40 children in a New Mexico ghost town for 40 days, leaving them to form their own civilization without the interference of adults."[1] A few critics dubbed it a "reality version" of *The Lord of the Flies*. The *Denver Post* TV critic Joanne Ostrow suggested this "awful-sounding new reality show is television's most controversial social experiment yet."[2] Awful sounding, indeed, not only due to concerns of endangerment (leaving children ages 8 to 15 potentially unsupervised, followed only by a film crew), but because this was billed as "reality TV," a genre known more for exploitation than wholesome entertainment. What would these kids be asked or *made* to do? Who would play Ralph and Piggy? Maybe this is why CBS sought to promote *Kid Nation* as an "aspirational social experiment," in an effort to distinguish the show from *typical* reality fare.[3]

One of the most striking aspects of the critical attention aimed at *Kid Nation* was the extent that describing it *as* a "social experiment" was so widely used and, more importantly, *taken at face value*. There was essentially no popular questioning that this *could even be* a "social experiment." Part of the reason was no doubt because using the term "social experiment" to describe Reality TV shows isn't at all unusual. More recently, a November 2012 promotional news release for *Big Brother Canada* claimed that, "This is a series like no other, an extreme social experiment where people willingly walk away from their families, friends and day-to-day lives for nearly three months."[4] In May 2013, Fox Broadcasting promoted their new reality TV show *Does Someone Have to Go?* as, "This isn't a game show. This isn't putting someone on an island. This is real life.

Every two weeks a different company will go through a social experiment where the bosses of each company will turn over the company to its employees."[5]

Indeed, from the earliest, explicitly-named "reality TV" shows *to* today, again and again, creators, critics, cast and crew have characterized programs ranging from MTV's *The Real World* to UPN's *Beauty and the Geek* to CBS's *Big Brother* to PBS's *Manor House* as "social experiments."[6] Mike Fleiss, for example, a co-producer of the notorious *Who Wants to Marry a Millionaire?* -- one of the first dating competition reality TV shows -- said, "It's a social experiment to be sure."[7] The host of *Survivor*, Jeff Probst justified grouping contestants/participants by race one season by stating, "I think it fits in perfectly with what *Survivor* does – it is a social experiment. And this is adding another layer to that experiment," just as Richard Hatch, the "winner" from the first season claimed the show "was a mentally demanding social experiment."[8] When Fox publicized *When Women Rule the World*, a never-aired show in which "12 macho, chauvinistic guys" were required to serve "12 attractive women who feel like it's still a man's world and who think they've hit a glass ceiling,"[9] FOX's president, Peter Liguori suggested that, "What it's doing, in a very Fox-like fashion, is testing social mores. This is a social experiment and not a sexual experiment."[10] And, while a very long list can be complied here, we might end to note that not every critic concluded *Kid Nation* was "awful-sounding" or essentially exploitive. A *San Jose Mercury News* media critic wrote, "I've only seen the promotional trailer, but maybe this really is a great social experiment that shows kids to their best advantage."[11]

The fact that a number of Reality TV shows have been characterized *as* "social experiments" has largely escaped serious scrutiny. It's as if the claim is either entirely apt or inconsequential; that no explanation's needed because these programs clearly *are* social experiments *or* that the claim's unworthy of critical attention because these shows clearly *aren't* social experiments. This article of course takes these claims seriously, as it seeks to demonstrate that key programs in the genre are indeed indebted to a line of social experiments that emerged from the behavioral sciences in the 1960s and an even earlier entertaining "studies" in commercial media. Examining this shared tradition of behavioral "social experiments" and a corresponding line of "studies of human nature" provides insights into reality TV, particularly in terms of the practiced techniques producers have drawn from and have used to their advantage. From these practices, Reality TV has taken that obvious manipulation – such arranged situations and contrived scenarios – do not discredit the "reality." Quite the opposite, this kind of manipulation is seen as a necessary component to its "real" authenticity. Reality TV producers have also learned that the didactic claim "social experiment" allows them to appear distant or even absent from any "results," suggesting that any and all of the actions are the participants' *alone*.

This article explores and highlights how earlier social experiments and entertaining "studies" have informed the making of Reality TV in conception, design, and rhetorical justification, most of all how they've been leveraged to the genre's advantage to serve and legitimize questionable methods. Arguing that social experiments can't easily be divided between "the scientific" and "those that are not,"

since there are important relationships between the social scientific and commercial/entertainment practices of "social experiments," this article identifies key works and the influential roles of particular producers: Stanley Milgram's "obedience" study; Funt's *Candid Camera*; and Mark Burnnett's *Survivor*. With Anna McCarthy already detailing a significant relationship between Milgram and Funt, how the former looked to the latter as a template for his work, this article identifies some additionally important connections, particularly in terms of their shared *media techniques and intentions*.[12] It's this earlier shared tradition that Reality TV has especially drawn from. Highlighting these earlier practices helps to not only inform a critique of the more problematic aspects of particular programing but it also suggests a way to correct if not prevent the more egregious, such as deceiving participants about all or *even part* of a producer's intentions. It almost goes without saying that a number of Reality TV shows have clearly misled, misrepresented, and even exploited its participants, young and old. Because of this, it may be time to take the lesson(s) learned in the academy and implement a kind of "Institutional Review Board" to vet Reality TV programs and set specific guidelines.

MILGRAM'S SHOCKING DISCOVERIES

First carried out in 1961, Stanley Milgram's "obedience study" remains one of if not the most widely discussed, notable/notorious post-WWII social experiments. A short description goes like this: People who believed they were participating in a "study of memory" were in fact the subjects for a different, concealed study that Milgram devised to examine their willingness to "obey an authority figure." Except the unsuspecting participants, everyone involved in the experiment was aware if its purpose and played deceptive roles. The participants/subjects were made to assume the role of a "Teacher" and then directed – "ordered" – by a played "Experimenter" to administer what the subject was led to believe were "electric shocks" to a portrayed "Learner," who purposely gave wrong answers. To heighten the stakes and tension, the subject/Teacher was casually told the "Learner" suffered from a heart condition. After each wrong answer, the subject/Teacher was then instructed to incrementally increase the electric's voltage-level. The Learner/Actor would feign audible pain with each increase. The study, of course, was intended to determine whether and, if so, to what extent the subject would obey the Experimenter's orders. A good majority followed the instructions, even up to the "final" 450-volt shock, when the "Learner" would stop responding, *at best* implying he'd passed-out.[13] The subjects who continued, it should be emphasized, overwhelmingly did so visibly upset, some clearly distraught by the experiment.[14]

After publishing his findings in 1963, Milgram's experiment was widely discussed and critiqued, in the field of social psychology and beyond. In response to critics who considered his deceptive methods unethical, Milgram countered, "We know that illusions are accepted in other domains without affecting our moral sensibilities. To use a simple-minded example, on radio programs, sound-effects are typically created by a sounds-effects man . . . [W]e do not accuse such programs of deceiving their listeners.

Rather we accept the fact that these are technical illusions used in support of a dramatic effort."[15] His methods, in his view, were widely and *popularly* used. He was merely borrowing techniques from another form – in this case dramatic entertainment – to aid his study. But more than "aid," really, as these "technical illusions" were very much *central* to both his conceptualization of the experiment (what scenario or methods might solicit what he wanted to study?) *and* its end-result, his "findings." He *needed* to create a set of conditions in which participants would "reveal" themselves, writing that he spent a great deal of time "carefully constructing a situation that captures the essence of obedience."[16] *His* active, supervisory role, the design, *and* the deception were *necessary*.

Milgram didn't "invent" deceiving unsuspecting people as a means to study them, though his work was quite influential in helping to institutionalize the technique in the behavioral sciences. James Korn notes that following Milgram, from 1965 to 1985, more than half of all the published experiments in the major social psychology journals used deception as the central means of producing their results.[17] The historical moment at which these techniques emerge is quite significant, as these experiments were greatly enabled by recording technologies that could be effectively hidden. Magnetic, recordable tape was available in the 1930s, but it really wasn't until the miniaturization of the electronic transistor in the early 1950s that recording equipment could be practically concealed. Pocket-sized tape recorders became widely available, and some companies even promoted their use as a means for making "secret recordings."[18] This new technical means for documenting and recording events and people proved key for these new kinds of deceptive social experiments.[19] When hidden, the recording equipment wouldn't call attention to the experiment, yet it provided media for later evaluation as it served as evidence itself.

No question, *concealed* equipment was important in terms of legitimizing the study. The visible presence of recording equipment could have been seen as an influencing, compromising factor in the subjects' behavior(s). In this way, the hidden equipment provided methodological defense for the study. As the subjects didn't *know* they were being recorded, their actions *must* have been authentic. They were seen as simply exhibiting their own "natural" or learned behavior, as they would in any "normal" setting. This attention to the technology – Milgram's "technical illusions" – paradoxically served to draw specific attention *to* Milgram's role as it simultaneously worked to *erase him*. He was largely seen to have created the conditions but at the same time play no role in the results. *He* was given credit for the study's design and its contribution but not really for what the participants "did."

One can fill a large warehouse with accounts that critique, praise, duplicate, and/or denounce Milgram's obedience study. Remarkably few, though, have taken up the role of media in his work. This is particularly surprising given Milgram produced six "educational films" in his lifetime, his first being *Obedience*, the work he developed in concert with his study. In his biography of Milgram, Blass calls attention to the fact that "one of his strongest interests, besides social psychology, was filmmaking. In fact, at the height of his academic career he took courses in filmmaking techniques."[20] Blass suggests this wasn't out of character for Milgram, in that he "was a man of many

interests, a sort of neo-Renaissance man."[21] But another, maybe more fruitful way to understand Milgram's experiments and his interest filmmaking and social psychology is to see them as essentially interrelated. Given the forms and practices he looked to, indeed *who and what he was inspired by*, his "scientific" experimental methods were deeply if not fundamentally informed by media. Most prominently, it was Allen Funt who first developed and honed the *central methods* Milgram looked to and leveraged.

ALLEN FUNT'S STUDIES OF "HUMAN NATURE"

At 8 p.m. on Tuesday, August 10, 1948, ABC premiered *The Candid Microphone*, a televised version of a popular radio program of the same name.[22] Before the first episode aired, a critic wrote, "ABC's little-devil-of-a-show, 'Candid Microphone,' will show what mischief it can create with a hidden camera."[23] And, indeed, the tremendously popular radio program that preceded the television show had a reputation for being mischievous, as the premise was to lure unsuspecting people into contrived, out-of-the-norm situations in order to document their reaction(s) for later broadcast. The emphasis was on creating situations that would solicit a laugh. Scenarios were designed to record how ostensibly random people would react when, say, a mailbox would begin to talk to them as they walked down a street, or when a professional mover was asked to haul away a moaning chest, or how a singing coach might respond to being asked to teach someone only in a bathtub.

Candid Microphone of course became *Candid Camera*, a program that until very recently most people in the U.S. not only knew of but could easily recite its famous catchphrase, "Smile, you're on *Candid Camera*." As creator and on-air figurehead for both the radio and television program, Allen Funt considered his work to be commercial entertainment, but overlooked in the vast majority of more recent accounts of him and the show is the degree to which Funt sought to emphasize his work's social value in terms of a contribution to a study of "human nature." He repeatedly stated throughout his life that the show offered insights into how people behave, that the show wasn't *merely* entertainment alone. Indeed, he highlighted this in the title of his first, 1952 autobiography *Eavesdropper at Large: Adventures in Human Nature with "Candid Mike" and "Candid Camera."* He wrote, "From my point of view, there is much more than the simple entertainment value. . . . [O]ur findings are used by eleven universities as basic subject matter in their drama, sociology, and psychology courses; instructors of those courses have told me that only in our candid studies have they found a means for examining human behavior."[24] And in this respect Funt found a degree of agreement, even among some of his critics. Early in the show's history, the *Washington Post*'s John Crosby criticized Funt's deceptive approach of relying on unsuspecting people, but he also said of a segment where Funt sought to pawn an authentic quarter-million-dollar diamond, "I must admit a reluctant admiration for a recent candid mike interview which provided as profound a glimpse into human cupidity as I've ever witnessed."[25]

Funt credits the inspiration for *Candid Microphone*/*Camera* to working with the Army Signal Corps, where he was tasked with recording soldiers' thoughts and

impressions during World War II. Noticing that some soldiers became nervous *after* seeing the present tape recorders, he worked on developing creative ways to hide the equipment yet still obtain quality recordings. "I had the great fortune," he noted, "to begin working with concealed microphones at exactly the same time when great developments were made in wire and tape recorders."[26] At the end of the war, Funt said he was then inspired to create a radio program around secretly recorded conversations. At first, Funt sought to present daily rhythms of life, like a casual conversation in restaurant or time spent waiting for a bus. He ran into a problem with this approach, though. As he hid microphones in public places, "The conversation," Funt concluded, "was dreadfully dull."[27] Funt's solution to the problem was, in his words, "to think of small crises into which we could place the average man in order to study his candid reactions." He found he needed to "guide the conversation," writing that "my role soon turned into that of a heckler who would tease, cajole, and shock unsuspecting people in order to record their reactions to some highly contrived and often ridiculous, situations."[28] So with an enthusiast's attention to secretive recording technologies, Funt developed his own "technical illusions," scenarios and situations that ranged from the simple – such as asking a cab driver to deliver a dog that needs to be tucked inside the driver's shirt while driving – to quite elaborate – having a car without an engine make its way into a service station in order to record the staff's reaction to the car's "problem." Funt was very much aware of the degree to which the situations were contrived. He carefully designed and scripted them all *in advance*. He was also well aware that he was deceiving his "subjects," an aspect he wrestled with in small part. However, like Milgram would do a good decade later, Funt maintained that none of this was *a distortion* to what was recorded, but, rather, the necessary techniques needed in order to reveal illuminating or entertaining characteristics of "human nature."

SCRIPTING THE "UNSCRIPTED"

Although it's tempting to make a formal distinction between Funt's work, made *as* commercial programming, and that of Stanley Milgram's, made *within and for* the academy, there are far more key similarities than differences – and the differences are more slight than fundamental. Their use of, approach to, and claims about media were alike. When compared solely on technical and procedural terms, setting aside for the moment intention and context, the similarities between Milgram's and Funt's work is quite striking. While the use of hidden recording equipment is a significant commonality, the more substantive parallels are to be found in the specific methods used to solicit their "results." Both relied on putting unsuspecting people into carefully and deliberately planned situations. Both relied on people who adopted personas to fool the unsuspecting "subject" in order to document her or his reaction and behavior. Both "revealed" the purpose of their projects to the participant once the test or prank ended, and both found *this* reaction to be *as* significant to the behavior exhibited during the experiment itself.

Another, key commonality was that both Funt and Milgram used well-planned and well-choreographed "scripts" to *guide* their unsuspecting participants. These were

far from "off the cuff" or casual "experiments." Situations were *well designed* to guide subjects towards a "result," or, in Funt's case, often a "punch line." Different people from different groups could be easily be inserted or imagined in these situations and "scripts." This is important as a media practice, since, as we'll see, it's a formula that's been used and built upon since, but it's also significant in terms of their works as *media texts*. The viewer was interestingly positioned as an active *participant* in the situation(s), making their works quite novel in this way. Viewers were encouraged to assume the role of a "researcher," to *study* and dissect both the script's design *and* the "subjects" reaction(s). Indeed, the participants in these texts were presented *as* subjects to critique. At the same time, the viewer was presented the opportunity to imagine him or herself *in* the situation. How might they react in "real life?" In this way, Funt and Milgram did in fact help develop a central feature of a media practice that would inform the development of Reality TV. While the cameras may no longer be concealed (at least not all of the cameras) in the genre, this change, as will be explored later, only *heightens and strengthens* the viewer's role in actively "decoding" the text, as the present cameras introduce another (exciting) piece of the experiment to be accounted for.[29]

Funt and Milgram deserve credit for innovating the basic methods and techniques that later Reality TV producers would draw from and use to their advantage. Funt's and Milgram's stated intentions are especially important here, as they both claimed to be fundamentally addressing questions and problems of "human behavior." They both saw media, as a form and practice, as central to their projects' aims. Milgram's accompanying film wasn't an add-on or afterthought. It was conceived as part of the project from the beginning. Their institutional contexts and respective pressures of course helped shape their approaches in terms of substantive "style." Milgram never really went for a "laugh." But they shared the same fundamental "why" and *how*, and they both rationalized their works and roles in similar ways. Both men presented their works as educational, arguing that the deception and other means employed in their work were necessary methods to aid greater learning about human behavior. That Funt operated in commercial broadcasting and did indeed go for a laugh doesn't mean he couldn't or even *didn't* contribute to this field of study. For example (and there are *many*), in a 1985 interview of Funt in *Psychology Today*, the researcher who created *The Stanford Prison Experiment*, which rivals Milgram's in notoriety, Philip Zimbardo, says to Funt, "You are really an experimental social psychologist. You share with some of my most creative colleagues … the ability to design and manipulate social situations that reveal much about the way we behave."[30] But again, Funt's and Milgram's roles in contributing to a distinctive kind of media practice is key. Their approach very much differed from the naturalistic and documentary work of their era, where the creator(s) sought to present her or himself as an uninvolved "observer," in that Funt and Milgram never disavowed their role. They in fact embraced and drew attention to their active roles in their projects, reasoning it to be central to their ends. Reality TV producers, as we'll also see, are especially indebted to their earlier methods, techniques, and rationales, as Funt and Milgram provided a dubious "ethical

foundation" in which to justify filming and then sharing/broadcasting people's reactions to unexpected events and situations.

MARK BURNETT'S PROFITABLE "SOCIAL EXPERIMENT"

At the beginning of *Survivor: Cook Islands*, the thirteenth season of the show, the "host," standing in the middle of a large sailboat with a beehive of activity around him as the "castaways" scrambled to collect items before they're imminently – and apparently surprising to them – forced off the boat, Jeff Probst enthusiastically declared "this is a social experiment like never before!" He was repeating, in a more dramatic visual fashion, the statement he made again and again in interviews leading up to the premiere, that this season was an especially grand "social experiment." While the season's hook of grouping contestants by "race" may have been a twist, since the first season in 2000, then "the most-watched series to be shown during the summer in television history," when sixteen participants were taken to the south Pacific island of Borneo, told to make their own shelter and find some of their own food and then presented with a series of "challenges" and "eliminations" over the course of thirty-nine days culminating in a million-dollar prize for the sole "Survivor," the premise of show itself had been presented as and was widely characterized as a "social experiment."[31]

While Mark Burnett did not originally create the premise of the show – he licensed it from a British TV producer, Charlie Parsons, who made it as "Expedition Robinson" in 1997 for Swedish TV – the format clearly complemented his goals and aims as a producer.[32] Burnett's first show was a *Survivor*-like team-based "adventure race," *Eco-Challenge*, which he created in 1992 and produced for TV three years later. Most notably, though, like Funt before him, Burnett has seen and presented his work *as* studies of human behavior under stressful and abnormal situations.

Indeed, very much like Funt, Burnett principally considers himself an entertainer while at the same time states, "personally, I'm interested in the sociological."[33] There's no contradiction here, as his intentions and methods have been intertwined. He's claimed, again and again, that he seeks to create entertaining situation that address problems of human and social interaction.[34] For instance, the reason he said he favored the remote-island setting of the first *Survivor* was that, "Nature strips away the veneer we show one another every day, at which point people become who they really are."[35] The time or strength-based challenges, the unexpected surprises or turn of events during his shows are, to him, created to be every bit as much educational as they are entertaining. As noted in the epigraph, Burnett suggests that "How [the participants] relate to others during the stress of [the show] becomes a lesson on how to optimally interact with family and coworkers."[36]

Across his work, Burnett has said he intentionally crafts ways to explore types of people and their behavior in dramatic fashion.[37] Because of this, his shows and approach, he argues, have important social value. Reflecting on the first season of *The Apprentice*, where a group of women and men were divided by gender into separate teams to compete for a cash prize and a job with Donald Trump, Burnett wrote in his own first, Funt-like autobiography, "Women believe that they are held back, underpaid,

and treated unfairly. But given a level playing field, women universally feel that they could dominate. Here was the perfect way to test the theory."[38] Whatever Burnett's true intentions with the show, his problematic presentation of gender inequalities, the questionable if not preposterous claim of a "level playing field," whether this was a marketing ploy or sincere, the fact that he so often presents he shows as "tests" and "social experiments" is quite significant. While not to be dismissed, at work here isn't *just* a rhetorical strategy to grant his work a degree of legitimacy or add a pseudo-scientific gloss for promotional value. The extent to which Burnett was or became familiar with forms of social experiments does not really matter at all or as much as appreciating the ways his approach connects with an earlier tradition. As novel an innovator Burnett's certainly been, he's fundamentally drawn from and reshaped the central *techniques* and key *methods* pioneered by Funt and Milgram. The big difference from them, then and now, though, is that "social experiments" of this sort are now well and rightfully restricted in the academy. You can no longer knowingly deceive or manipulate people in any way here. In commercial media, however, "social experiments" have only increased in scope and number, becoming a running, controversial staple.

SELLING OUTRAGE: (THE ABSENCE OF) REALITY TV ETHICS

Written in 2000 as a critique of the first season of *Survivor*, the title of a *New York Times* article sarcastically asked, "Hey, What if Contestants Give Each Other Shocks?" Insightfully connecting Milgram's and Zimbardo's similar set of questionable techniques to Burnett's, Erica Goode noted that, "By the late 1970s, ethical guidelines discouraged the use of most deception in psychological research … As a result, neither the Milgram study nor the Stanford prison experiment could be carried out today. … The producers of reality television shows, however, are unfettered by such constraints."[39] Programs like *Survivor*, Goode argued, deliberately placed people into potentially harmful situations – "make them eat bugs, walk on hot coals … chain four women to a man for a week … lock people up in a prison" – while "the philosophy appears to be that participants in reality shows know what they are getting into."[40] Indeed, the question of what constitutes "deception" is central here. People unwittingly participated in Funt's and Milgram's "experiments" while many people eagerly seek to be on shows like *Survivor*. But "deception" in these kinds of Reality TV programs is practiced in many other kinds of ways. Just because a person knows they're participating in a "Reality TV show" does not mean she or he is made *fully aware* of what's in store, from the specific events that might occur during filming to *how* he or she will be finally portrayed.[41] But even if a participant were to say something like, "bring on the unexpected!" or even "I *don't care* what's in store," significant ethical concerns remain, especially for the "producers" of these kinds of shows.

That so many Reality TV shows claim to be "social experiments" and entertaining "tests" makes sense in terms of how these shared traditions foreground the end "results" over the means. When the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry more recently tried to persuade NBC to cancel *Baby Borrowers*, a reality-TV

show that temporarily placed willing-parents' infants and toddlers with participating teenage-couples in order to explore and document how they *all* would behave, the network responded to criticism by maintaining that "'Baby Borrowers' is a social experiment that can educate teenagers on the responsibilities of parenting," much the same way Milgram defended his work by foregrounding the larger purpose of the experiment.[42] For experiments of this sort, the means are in service to the larger "goal." The *designed* methods, however questionable, are presented as secondary if not necessary. For example, when a cameraman during the second season of Survivor stood by as a participant was badly burned, Burnett defended the action in terms of specific rules. "I would have fired the cameraman," Burnett explained, had he dropped his camera and helped or perhaps offered an earlier warning, stating that "The cameraman isn't a medical person; the cameraman is there to film."[43] Speaking about *Kid Nation*'s contentious use of kids, Mark Andrejevic suggested that, "the only reason they get away with it is that they're trading on a history of documentary filmmaking. … In any other industry, this would be called exploitation."[44] It's more the specific history of social experiments, though, that has both legitimized and provided the "cover" for the manufactured situations and, again, the suspect methods employed by the producers.

This shared tradition works in the producers' favor by simultaneously celebrating and erasing their role, as it makes contradictory claims about the "design" that work to support the validity of the "results" while redirecting problems over methods *onto* the participants. On one hand, producers emphasize that their deliberately manufactured settings and their active roles during the experiments/filming are, again, *necessary* techniques in order to document "behavior." On the other hand, producers claim these settings and conditions simply catalyze findings rather than in way cause them. "On our show, it's a competition, and we're just the officials," says Mark Koops, the executive producer of NBC's *The Biggest Loser*. "We set up the game … and we don't overtly influence things at that point."[45] In an analogous manner, *Survivor*'s Jeff Probst has said, "This is an equal-opportunity game. Twenty people are given the same materials, the same odds of winning a million dollars."[46] In both cases, the properly designed experiment is said to have no determining effect or bias in the outcome.[47]

The claim(s) that these kinds of shows are scripted competitions needs to be addressed, since it's another one of the ways in which producers deflect criticism. To argue that show like *Survivor* is a "fair competition" in practice or free from bias is frankly absurd. These shows are casted. Producers play the deciding role in *who* gets to participate. One could, say, pit a group of seasoned wilderness enthusiasts against a group of asthmatic city-dwellers who've never spent a night outdoors. More importantly, though, just like Funt and Milgram, the scripts for these kinds of shows are well planned and choreographed in advance. The exact "outcome" may be open, but its range is indeed anticipated if not determined from the start. Again, just like Funt and Milgram before them, the producer's designed situations and their active involvement need just as much if not more of the critical attention than the "participants" here. Producers have been able to get away with a lot of ethically questionable actions by *pretending* they merely create the rules and then "watch what happens."

To be clear, not all reality TV shows are the same. There are a variety of "formats" in the genre.[48] Burnett has been important to note and highlight here because he early on in the history of explicitly named "Reality TV" helped shape the genre, especially the competition variety, one of the most duplicated formats in the larger genre. A good number of shows since have clearly been indebted to *Survivor*, the show's structure *and* Burnett's stated rationales. It should be emphasized, if not clear, that even in some of the formats without competitive eliminations, the emphasis on "studying human behavior" remains. None of the kids were voted "off" *Kid's Nation*. *The Real World* and *Big Brother* are often characterized as "what happens when" different kinds of people are put together in a house with cameras and microphones. *Wife Swap* is about "what happens when" two mothers from culturally different families are "swapped" for a week or more. These kinds of programs place their participants *in* situations and in this way are often claimed to be "social experiments." Again, no different than scripted competitions, the producers of these kinds of formats point to a kind of "properly designed experiment" in an effort to erase their handiwork and active involvement. As typical for the larger genre, producers seek to shift any public "outrage" over content onto the participants, hiding the fact that the producers have almost everything to do with "what happened" and, especially, how things are presented.

As noted before, one of the most obvious differences between most all of Reality TV and that of Funt's and Milgram's work is the obvious presence of the camera. For Funt and Milgram, the hidden camera was seen as methodologically important, a key aspect to its seeming authenticity. The central concern about the visible presence of a camera of course rests on a presumption that some if not many people will consciously or even unconsciously behave differently in its presence than they would if "no one was watching."[49] There's also the related assumption that, in front of an audience, some people will deliberately craft their behavior for fame, celebrity, or notoriety. But for more recent reality TV "social experiments," whether people "act for the camera" or are in fact complicit with the producers in crafting particular moments really doesn't matter as much how these works incorporate this issue to paradoxically reinforce what is "real" about them.[50] What's distinct is how Reality TV shows have been able to foreground and *incorporate* this "problem." The presence of the camera is really no different than the presence of the researcher or producer during a "study," long seen and accepted as an essential technique of enhanced reflexivity towards studying/documenting human behavior. But most of all, by presenting a search for the authentic within all of the obvious manipulation, the overt cameras included, this "search" naturalizes the presumption that there's indeed something authentic or "real" to find. The presence of cameras then, has also worked exceedingly well in the producers favor by serving to deflect or redirect criticism *onto* the participants. It's seemingly always the participant's "fault," never the people responsible for *selecting* the participants, *creating* the conditions, and *choosing* what to "reveal" or discard.

A CONCLUDING PROPOSAL: IRBs FOR RTV!

The tradition of "social experiments" *as* forms of media has long been a confluence of "scientific" and commercial practices. Reality TV producers haven't "borrowed" from this tradition as much as they've *remade* and advanced it. It's a tradition that's worked so profitably in their favor, as it's provided persuasive rationales for choices *and* "escape" from related criticism. On one hand, claims of "social experiments" have allowed producers to legitimize their questionable methods in order to produce their "self-evident" results. Just like Milgram and Funt, methods like deliberately placing people into stressful and/or abnormal situations are seen as *necessary* in order to properly document "human behavior," all in service to larger educational or social goals. On the other hand, as commercial entertainment, producers can – and often do – claim to be "trivial" and therefore seemingly harmless entertainment. You're not supposed to take it *seriously*.

Social experiments in the academy are now and have been subject to strict rules and oversight. Accounts of the history of "Institutional Review Boards," IRBs, note that a 1972 disclosure of the thirty-year U.S. funded "Tuskegee Syphilis Study" proved to be a defining moment, helping to create the National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research in 1974. That commission produced the "Belmont Report" in 1979, the document that has served as the basis for continually revised federal guidelines for human research.[51] Social experiments such as Milgram's and, later, Zimbardo's were very much in mind when producing these guidelines.[52] Now widely seen as unethical in the academy, their experiments would not be approved today. This is no doubt why a few social scientists have actually looked to reality TV in order to "test" some theories. For example, in "Survivor, Social Choice, and the Impediments to Political Rationality: Reality TV as Social Science Experiment," Ed Wingenbach writes, "Social choice theory argues that the outcomes of collective action may be explained in terms of the calculation of costs and benefits in pursuit of individual preferences."[53] Social scientists, however, have never been able to conduct an experiment to test this theory because, in the author's words, "Social Scientists have neither the funds *nor authority to impose such conditions* [emphasis added]." "Fortunately," he then writes, "CBS does."[54] Phillip Zimbardo, too, simply moved from the academy to reality TV to conduct his experiments. He was the "chief scientific consultant" and on-screen analyst for the three-episode series *The Human Zoo*, which documented three days of tests and experiments among twelve unsuspecting participants.[55] He's also been a reality TV show consultant for British ITV and U.S. NBC.

Reality TV social experiments aren't subject to any kind of peer review boards or institutional rules. They clearly "get away with" methods and approaches that would never be allowed in the academy. Again, even if participants "sign away their rights," even if they have a good idea of "what they're getting into," this does *not* absolve a producer's complicity or the ethical concerns at stake. Reality TV shows have come a long way from the era of *Candid Camera*, when at least Funt felt *some* responsibility, writing, for example, that "when a person stutters painfully we would never dream of subjecting him to the embarrassment of a public appearance."[56] Today, the deception Funt and Milgram used seems quaint in comparison to the ways in which people, young

and old, are solicited to appear on reality TV shows and then portrayed, with literally no rules or regulations beyond ones that cover entertainment practices more generally. Given that many of these programs do indeed belong to a tradition of social experiments, it may be worth giving serious consideration to an IRB-like review board for Reality TV.

Questions about what's "acceptable" are of course subjective, no different here than in the academy, and an IRB-like board for Reality TV might address this, ideally made up of people knowledgeable of the already-existing ethical rules and guidelines as they relate to "human subjects." This is a sincere proposal, one rooted in the fact that, as this article has sought to show, reality TV shows are rightfully located in a definite tradition. Since there's obviously no incentive *or pressure* for producers to implement their own common rules, an IRB-like board to set guidelines and provide oversight for Reality TV is *needed*. There are a good number of ways to implement such a board, and the point here isn't to list each or even *a* specific way. With any approach, at a minimum, *laws* need to address the use of "kids" in these programs. It's one thing for a child to participate in a small-scale, local peewee football league or beauty pageant, quite another to participate in *Kid's Nation* or *Toddlers and Tiaras*, to be broadcast to millions, for commercial gain, all under the active control and *ultimate supervision* of a producer, regardless of what a kid's parent agrees to.[57] It's time to take producer's claims of "social experiments" as *genuine*. It's also time to take the lessons learned in the academy and apply them to broadcast TV, *especially* those stations subject to oversight by the FCC, to which we can and should exert *real* political pressure.

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NOTES

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[1] Mark Graham, "Defamer First Look: The 'Kid Nation' Preview,' Defamer, 16 May 2007, <http://defamer.com/hollywood/les-moonves-is-their-only-god-now/defamer-first-look-the-kid-nation-preview-261125.php> (23 August 2007).

[2] Joanne Ostrow, "'Kid Nation' has CBS on defensive," Denver Post, 25 August 2007, C10.

[3] Lisa de Moraes, "CBS Gambles Lox, Stock and Barrel,'" Washington Post, 17 May 2007, C07.

[4] "10,000 CANADIANS EAGER TO LEAVE IT ALL BEHIND FOR EXCLUSIVE SPOT IN BIG BROTHER CANADA HOUSE," 06 November 2012, < http://shawmediatv.ca/press/read/?1829> (8 May 2013).

[5] "Prepare Yourself: Does Someone Have to Go?" Fox Broadcasting YouTube Channel, 09 May 2013 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ruLbhk2AMHM> (24 May 2013)

[6] A search for "social experiment" and "reality TV" on Lexis-Nexis back in August 2007 returned over 500 articles for the past ten years. Many articles are duplicates run in multiple magazines and newspapers – Associated Press stories, for example – yet the breadth of the use of "social experiment" in relation to many programs labeled reality TV is clear, then *and* now.

[7] Emily Sendler, "When gold diggers attack!," Salon, 14 December 1999, <http://www.salon.com/ent/log/1999/12/14/wantstomarry/index.html> (23 August 2007).

[8] Tanya Barrientos, and Dwayne Campbell, "Survive this: A new hue to CBS competition: Race defines the tribes in 'Survivor 13,'" *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 24 August 2006; Richard Hatch, *101 Survival Secrets: How to make $1,000,000, lose 100 pounds, and just plain live happily* (New York: The Lyons Press, 2000), 122; Lisa de Moraes, "'Survivor' Host's Geoethnic Studies, From Soup to Mutts," *Washington Post*, 8 September 2006, C01.

[9] Steve Rogers, "Fox announces new 'When Women Rule the World' reality series," Daily Variety, 01 January 2007, <http://www.realitytvworld.com/news/fox-announces-new-when-women-rule-world-reality-series-4570.php> (18 November 2007).

[10] J. Max Robins, "Harsh Reality," Broadcasting and Cable, 22 January 2007, <http://www.broadcastingcable.com/article/CA6408862.html> (23 August 2007).

[11] Susan Young, "'Kid Nation' Stirring Up Controversy, The Mercury News, 30 August 2007, E1.

[12] Anna McCarthy, "Stanley Milgram, Allen Funt, and Me: Postwar Social Science and the 'First Wave' of Reality TV," in *Reality TV: Remaking Television Culture* ed. Susan Murray and Laurie Ouellette (New York: New York University Press, 2004).

[13] A male always played the "Learner." "Subjects" were both male and female.

[14] It might be noted here that Milgram's project was political in intention, in that he sought to demonstrate that human behavior/s is/are a product of an organizational system that makes most people behave one way instead of another. Milgram repeatedly argued that, "The problem of obedience … is not wholly psychological. The form and shape of society and the way it is developed have much to do with it." Milgram's sought to demonstrate that people could too easily be coerced by authorities into morally and ethically compromised actions, that when guided by an authority figure a majority of people could be made to take part in an activity that they would otherwise likely avoid or even abhor. See Stanley Milgram, *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), 11.

[15] Stanley Milgram, "Subject Reaction: The Neglected Factor in the Ethics of Experimentation," The Hastings Center Report, Vol. 7, No. 5 (Oct., 1977), pp. 19-23.

[16] Milgram, *Obedience to Authority*, 23.

[17] James H. Korn, *Illusions of Reality: A History of Deception in Social Psychology* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997).

[18] See David Morton, *Off the Record: The Technology and Culture of Sound Recording in America* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2000); and Aaron Foisi Nmungwun, *Video Recording Technology: Its Impact on Media and Home Entertainment* (Hillsdale, N.J.: L. Erlbaum Associates, 1989).

[19] See Toby Miller, *Technologies of Truth: Cultural Citizenship and the Popular Media* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998).

[20] Thomas Blass, "Milgram's Films," StanleyMilgram.com, 21 November 2007, <http://www.stanleymilgram.com/films.php> (16 August 2008).

[21] Blass, "Milgram's Films."

[22] "The News of Radio," New York Times, 30 July 1948, 36.

[23] Sonia Stein, "Let's Cash In Those Puns," The Washington Post, 8 August 1948, pg. L1.

[24] Allen Funt, *Eavesdropper at Large: Adventures in Human Nature with "Candid Mike" and "Candid Camera"* (New York: The Vanguard Press, 1952), 181.

[25] John Crosby, "Candid Mike Has a Tight Squeeze," The Washington Post, 26 September 1948, pg. L1.

[26] Funt, 14.

[27] Funt, 15.

[28] Funt, 16 and 24.

[29] For more here, see: Hillier, Paul Myron, "From Barnum to Burnett: Popular Sleuthing and 'Reality' Entertainment," *The Quint* v4.4, September 2012

[30] Philip G. Zimbardo, "Laugh Where We Must, Be Candid Where We Can," Psychology Today, June 1985, page 44. The short summary of Zimbardo's experiment goes like this: In 1971, eighteen Stanford students answered a newspaper ad for participants in "a study of prison life." The self-selected students were then randomly divided into equal numbers of "guards" and "prisoners" for what has become known as the "Stanford Prison Experiment." Scheduled to last fourteen days, Zimbardo ended the experiment after six when a visiting colleague expressed deep concern after witnessing the "guards" beating the "prisoners." "These were real boys who were really suffering, and that fact had escaped me," Zimbardo states in a later documentary he made, suggesting that he, too, became caught up in his role as a prison supervisor. "I had to end the experiment."

[31] Fifty-one million people watched the final episode, second only to the Super Bowl that year. See: Jim Rutenberg, "And Then There Was One: 'Survivor,'" New York Times, 23 August 2000. Also see Bill Carter, "Survival of the Pushiest," New York Times, 28 January 2001.

[32] Accounts of Mark Burnett's persistent efforts to get *Survivor* made, his multiple rejections and his eventual agreement with CBS to air the show have become somewhat legendary, as Burnett was only able to produce *Survivor* after finding *his own* funding and advertisers for the project. Eschewing what were then traditional approaches to commercial TV, Burnett sold companies on product placements within and as *a part of the narrative* of the series, in the form of temptations, prizes, and rewards, and in the process not only recovered his production costs before the first episode ever aired but actually turned a profit. See Amanda D. Lotz, *The Television Will Be Revolutionized* (New York: New York University Press, 2007), 221-223.

[33] Susan Johnston, "Watch Out. More Rats Ahead?," Brant Publications, Feburary 2001, <http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1285/is_2_31/ai_69757684> (15 August 2008).

[34] Burnett, Mark, *Jump In!: Even If You Don't Know How to Swim*, (New York: Random House, 2005), 123-132.

[35] Burnett, 186.

[36] Burnett, 116.

[37] In terms of "types," see Ron Simon, "the changing definition of reality television," in *Thinking Outside the Box: A Contemporary Television Genre Reader*, Gary Edgerton and Brian Rose, eds. (University of Kentucky Press, 2006), 191.

[38] Mark Burnett, Jump In! (New York: Random House, 2005), 203

[39] Erica Goode, "Hey, What if Contestants Give Each Other Shocks, New York Times, 27 August 2000.

[40] Goode.

[41] Reality TV producers generally favor two kinds of participants: (1) Those who "know the game," who are willing to play a/their role and (2) those who appear totally clueless, naïve to their own self and may be "ripe" for dramatic/entertaining action. But in either case, Reality TV producers are out to craft stories and entertainment. Period. Controversy is often *great*. They typically don't care about misrepresenting participants or using them to their own advantage.

[42] Patricia Cohen, "NBC Show Draws Fire," New York Times, 3 July 2008, Arts, Briefly.

[43] Allison Hope Weiner, "Docu Drama: The producers of 'Survivor,' 'Temptation Island,' and others fess up," Entertainment Weekly, 07 March 2001, <http://www.ew.com/ew/article/0,,101752,00.html> (11 September 2008).

[44] Ez and Maria Elena Fern, "Is child exploitation legal in 'Kid Nation'?," Los Angeles Times, 17 August 2008, E-1.

[45] Daniel Frankel, "Hubbub over nonfiction faking fizzles: Staging of unscripted series doesn't deter audience," Variety, 3 June 2008.

[46] Derrik J. Lang, "Tribes on newest 'Survivor' show to be segregated by race," The San Deigo Union Tribune, 24 August 2006

[47] Competition is said to be a neutral component for many, not all, reality TV social experiments. This serves several purposes. "Competitions" of course have an exceptional degree of social relevance, in that it is often celebrated as a "natural" element of social life. Competitive eliminations also serve as a narrative arc and complement the *assembly-line production* of reality TV. As Simon notes that "[t]he most successful reality shows have incorporated game show strategies, especially a context with an ultimate winner, all of which help to propel the narrative to a definitive conclusion." Simon, 192.

[48] A general search for "types of reality TV shows" returns a good number of collective lists. No need to duplicate here.

[49] In a comparable way, it's the same reason some people object to cameras in the courtroom.

[50] For an extended account here, see Hillier, Paul Myron, "From The Stanford Prison Experiment to An American Family: The Invention of Theatrical Science," *Quarterly Review of Film & Video*, 32.2, March 2015.

[51] See *Human Subjects Research: A Handbook for Institutional Review Boards*, Greenwald, R. A., Ryan, M. K., and Mulvihill, J. E. (Eds.) (New York: Plenum Press, 1982).

[52] See "The Neglected Factor in the Ethics of Experimentation," The Hastings Center Report, Vol. 7, No. 5, Oct., 1977.

[53] Ed Wingenbach, "Survivor, Social Choice, and the Impediments to Political Rationality: Reality TV as Social Science Experiment" in Survivor lessons: essays on communication and reality television ed. Matthew J. Smith and Andrew F. Wood (Jefferson, N.C. : McFarland & Company, Inc., 2003), 132.

[54] Wingenbach, 132.

[55] Films for the Humanities, "The Human Zoo," Films Media Group <http://ffh.films.com/id/4655/Brief_Encounters.htm> (18 August 2008).

[56] Funt, 116.

[57] I'm personally convinced that thirty or forty years from now people will look back on some Reality TV shows as a form of child abuse.