



SCRIPT DOCTOR: MEDICINE IN THE MEDIA

How Real Is (Health) Reality TV?

By Andrew Holtz, MPH

How real is reality TV? "Not too real." That's the frank assessment of Oscar-winning documentary and reality TV producer Susan Hadary.

There's a reason for that, she explained. "Reality is not too exciting, you know. A medical procedure takes a long time. The patient may not be the most charismatic patient. We are searching for elements that are, I don't want to say sensational, but highly engaging to an audience. So we have to find cases that are extraordinary."

"Don't bother trying to merely reveal a new perspective on a common health challenge. Find something new. Something extreme."

In recent years, Hadary has produced several shows and series for Discovery, Discovery Health, and TLC. In 2000, she and her videographer, William Whiteford, won an Academy Award for their short subject documentary *King Gimp*. The project itself was anything but short. Hadary and Whiteford began following Dan Keplinger, who has cerebral palsy, when he was 12 years old. They stayed with him through his college graduation—13 years in all.

Astoundingly long-term and comprehensive profiles of people facing health challenges were their hallmark. I met Hadary and Whiteford in the early 1990s. We were both winners of an award for programs on Alzheimer's disease. Mine was a CNN special that took a couple of months to assemble. Their film, *Grace*, followed a woman with Alzheimer's through her seven-year journey from diagnosis to death.

But even as their filmmaking virtuosity was recognized by "Oscar," Hadary and Whiteford had to adapt to changes in the TV market. Public television projects and the occasional HBO deal gave way to series assignments from cable TV networks. The Discovery, Discovery Health, and TLC channels are all part of Discovery Communications, which bills itself as "the number-one nonfiction media company," with more than 100 net-

works in 170 countries.

When working with public TV, Hadary and Whiteford would come up with an idea for a program. Then they would make a deal with Maryland Public Television to offer the finished product to public TV stations across the countries. (Note: unlike the commercial networks, PBS is really a sort of co-op arrangement of independent public broadcasting operations, each deciding whether and when to air shows offered up by PBS and other sources.) In this acquisition model, the client generally just accepted or declined a program, without much, if any, input into the content or style.

How Things Have Changed!

Oh, how things have changed. Instead of programs springing from the minds of filmmakers, now they are more often crafted by network marketing departments. (A look at the filmography of Hadary and Whiteford illustrates how their work changed as the market changed—See box.)

"It used to be that you'd pitch an

Second of a three-part series

idea and they'd go, 'Awesome! We want it.' Now it's, 'These are our programming streams and this is where we need programming and your idea doesn't fit into what our focus groups are now telling us people want to watch,' Hadary says.

"They choose what they think their audiences would like to see. And right now the demographics are 18-to-40 year olds, and Discovery is heavy into the males, TLC is heavy into the females. So they are very specific in what they are looking for," she says. "You can produce anything you want, but right now no one's going to put it on the air."

What do they want to put on the air?

"If I had someone with a 2,000 pound tumor, I could sell it," she says.

The stranger, the better. Don't bother trying to merely reveal a new perspective on a common health challenge. Find something new. Something extreme.

"A procedure that's never, ever been done before and who's going to



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revolutionize medicine. A person who's only going to survive with an extraordinary procedure that only one doctor has ever done before. These are the things on the outer limits of medicine that also have an emotional component to them," Hadary says.

Hadary tries to find ways to match market demand with her interests as a filmmaker.

"My goal is to do educational programming...with a sufficient entertainment factor so that people will watch it. Because if they don't watch it, then you aren't teaching anybody."

While reality shows have to entertain viewers, just like dramas and comedies, they don't just make stuff up.

"We do show, if someone has a brain injury, we actually show if they are in a coma, how long they are in a coma for, the different things that are tried, what sort of interventions are possible, why brain injury is different than other kinds of injury. So you do get that watching our shows. You do get information."

"The reality is the reality. The person had this happen to them. But you select A over B.

What You Don't See

While each event seen on reality shows did happen and the medical facts are checked, the results are not merely a summary of everything the camera recorded. The selection process, which stories and elements to focus on and which to omit, is what separates reality TV from reality.

"Say for example we had a young girl who was a ballet dancer who came into Shock Trauma [the trauma center at the University of Maryland Medical Center in Baltimore] and she was a beautiful young lady. Her parents were devastated and she was devastated. She

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Hadary-Whiteford Productions

HBO

- **Bong & Donnell**
Arthropoyosis
- **King Gimp**
Cerebral Palsy
- **Love Josh**
Overcoming loss and bereavement

Maryland Public TV

- **Grace**
Alzheimer's Disease
- **Dominick and Margaret**
Older people with disabilities living independently
- **The Wilson Crisis**
Stroke rehabilitation
- **Marge and Walter**
Caregivers
- **Miss Nora's Store**
Rural health care
- **Rachael being 5**
Cerebral Palsy
- **Shakisha and Friends**
Spina Bifida
- **Sara's Graduation**
Cerebral Palsy

Discovery Networks

- **Transplant**
- **Critical Incident**
The streets of Baltimore turn deadly, leaving the trauma staff to deal with gunshot wounds and stab-bings.
- **Med School**
Follow four young people, each in a different year of their medical studies, and see the emotional struggles and personal crises they go through as well as the sheer hard work and strength of personality required to enter this most demanding of professions.
- **The Critical Hour**
16-episode series for Discovery produced in 2004-2006, features care provided by the R Adams Cowley Shock Trauma Center.

