

The Ethics of Reality TV

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Just because you can do it to get ratings, does that mean it's right? Bruce Weinstein, also known as the "Ethics Guy," takes on A&E's reality TV show Intervention after episodes aired in which producers allowed subjects to drive cars while under the influence of alcohol or drugs.

ALISON STEWART, host:

You know that saying that you can't turn away from something awful, it's like watching a car wreck?

And in some ways, it's the lure of reality television, watching those cringe-worthy moments. But what if there really was a car wreck? Millions of people who watched a VH1 reality show where former child star Danny Bonaduce got drunk, crashed his car. On CBS, little kids use stoves and are around fire without adult supervision on "Kid Nation."

And on a show broadcast on A&E, a show that calls itself a documentary series -the name of it: "Intervention" - cameras follow addicts' behavior and their families as they attempt to help through a staged intervention. Here's one woman confronting her sister who drinks about a fifth of alcohol a day.

(Soundbite of show, "Intervention")

Unidentified Woman #1: I realize that I have been ignoring or downplaying the seriousness of your problems. I think I thought if I ignored it, that it would go away. I didn't want to think those other alternatives such as you getting in a car crash or OD'ing or not being around. I don't think anyone wanted on face the reality that you're slowly killing yourself.

STEWART: But what if her sister had gotten behind the wheel of a car while the camera crew watched? It happened in one episode.

And this week leads us to our next guest, Bruce Weinstein, a.k.a. the Ethics Guy, writes a column about ethics for BusinessWeek. And his column this week focuses on a particularly troubling episode of that show "Intervention."

Thanks for being with us in the studio, Bruce.

Mr. BRUCE WEINSTEIN (Ethics Columnist, BusinessWeek): Thanks for inviting me, Alison.

STEWART: So explain the episode that you actually wrote about this particular woman.

Mr. WEINSTEIN: Well, according to the New York Times, apparently, a producer stood by and watched a woman drink some vodka and then get into her car when she was clearly inebriated. And the producer did nothing on the grounds that this woman would have gotten into the car with or without him. And the executive producer of the series raised the point that he had no legal obligation to get involved, and so that really raises the broader question, if it's legal, is it ethical? And, of course, the answer to that is no. I mean, ethics, like Hebrew National, holds us to a higher standard.

STEWART: Right.

LUKE BURBANK, host:

Wow. Hebrew National, new sponsor of THE BRYANT PARK PROJECT.

(Soundbite of laughter)

Mr. WEINSTEIN: Didn't think you could tie ethics into salami, did you? But just because we have a right to do something doesn't mean it's right to do it, and history is rife with examples in which the practice is legal, but it was wrong.

Slavery was legal till the 13th Amendment was passed. It was wrong. Women couldn't vote in this country until 1920. Just because they did not have a right to vote doesn't mean that they had no moral entitlement to vote. Child labor was legal, and so on and so forth. You could think of many examples, even today, where practices are legal but they're wrong.

STEWART: Well, the producers of the show also told the New York Times that they have intervened in some other situations where they thought there was immediate danger, so they were going to take them on a case-by-case basis. Is there something to that, where you really have to look at the situations case by case? They are not police officers, as one lawyer said. They're not cops.

Mr. WEINSTEIN: They're not police officers, but, first and foremost, we're all human beings. And when you show up with a camera, all of a sudden, you become a player, if you will, in the moral drama. So it's a cop out to say, well, this woman would have gotten into the car anyway with or without me. There's a difference. When you're there, you have a moral responsibility to intervene, just like as if...

BURBANK: It's like Schrodinger's cat, right? It's like by opening the box, by being there, you're affecting what's happening already.

STEWART: Let me play - let me get on the other side of this. They consider themselves a documentary series. Is there a difference between documentary series and reality series, because as documentarians and as journalists, we know you may have witnessed something, but you have to step back from it.

Mr. WEINSTEIN: Well, the term documentary or reality is applied very loosely. As we know, these shows are heavily produced, heavily edited. I mean, I like the show, "Kitchen Nightmares." And you know what your watching isn't real. It's set up by the producers, and it's entertaining as far as it goes. But when you're talking about human lives, suddenly, there are ethical issues raised, and it's simply wrong not because I say it, but because they're just basic ethical principles that are common to all societies, all civilized cultures and all religious traditions. And that's what determines what's right or wrong, not what the law happens to be.

STEWART: All right, quickly. What if it's just a gotcha show, where you just put somebody in an extreme situation and embarrass them heavily?

Mr. WEINSTEIN: You mean, like, "Hell Date" on BET?

STEWART: Well, here's one of your favorite shows.

Mr. WEINSTEIN: How did you know that?

(Soundbite of laughter)

Mr. WEINSTEIN: You know, I forgot...

STEWART: Research.

Mr. WEINSTEIN: ...when I tell your producers something, it's all on the record.

STEWART: All right, you know, radio. You got about 30 seconds.

Mr. WEINSTEIN: What was the question?

(Soundbite of laughter)

BURBANK: Hey, why this early, man? Why don't we keep him over?

STEWART: Okay.

BURBANK: Let's just ask a question on the other side.

STEWART: Bruce Weinstein is the Ethics Guy. We're going to continue the discussions after a quick break, and I'll re-word the question one more time.

Stay with THE BRYANT PARK PROJECT from NPR News. More discussion about the ethics of reality television.

(Soundbite of music)

BURBANK: Welcome back to THE BRYANT PARK PROJECT from NPR News.

We are always available online at npr.org/bryantpark. I'm Luke Burbank.

STEWART: And I'm Alison Stewart.

Joining us in studio is the Ethics Guy, Bruce Weinstein. We've been discussing the ethics of reality TV, and we're talking about some really heavy subject about people having their lives put in danger and watching camera crews watch them and the ethics of it. But I asked you a question about when the stakes aren't so high, when it's a reality show - one of these gotcha shows - there was one I was watching - I don't want to gang up on BET here - where they put guys in a room, and they were applying for a job and their interviewer was hideously racist, just saying horribly racist thing to see if the interviewee would say anything. And I was watching with my husband and we thought, well, that poor guy just wants a job.

Mr. WEINSTEIN: Yeah.

STEWART: He's been put in a really difficult situation. Was that an ethical situation?

Mr. WEINSTEIN: It really depends on how the subjects react afterwards. If they say, you know, it's all in good fun and no problem, then, obviously, in retrospect, it was okay. But I can imagine somebody being really upset and probably not allowing their image to be broadcast.

I was thinking, though, about the show "Hell Date" on BET, and there's another program that probably none of your listeners listen to, but I love it. It's the "Roy D. Mercer Show" on - it's an outfit, Phil and Brent from a Tulsa radio station. And this guy, Roy D. Mercer, is a hillbilly who calls and makes ridiculous remarks to people, but then lets them in on the joke - unlike, say, Tom Mabe, who calls telemarketers and doesn't let them in on the joke. That is the moral difference. Once, you know, you cue someone in at the end and it's all in good fun, most people don't ever have a problem with that. And why should they?

STEWART: Bruce Weinstein is the Ethics Guy. Thanks for walking us through this this morning.

Mr. WEINSTEIN: Oh, sure.

STEWART: Nice to meet you.

BURBANK: You know, it's all reality television discussion all the time on the BPP. Coming up, we're going to talk to Sarah Bunting of "Television Without Pity," about what she's watching, ethical or otherwise. First though, we've got some news from our very own Rachel Martin.