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Blackwell Publishing
Malden, MA 2003
Selling *Survivor*

The Use of TV News to Promote Commercial Entertainment

Matthew P. McAllister

As most Americans who were not stranded on a tropical island knew, the hot television program of both summer 2000 and winter–spring 2001 was CBS's *Survivor*. The program about contestants stranded on, and then ceremoniously voted off, exotic and isolated locations was a television phenomenon. *Survivor* involves physical endurance, group dynamics, Machiavellian strategy, and most importantly for CBS, large commercial revenue. Ratings, advertiser visibility, and network promotion were sky-high for the program.

During the April 26, 2001 episode of *Survivor: Australian Outback*, an announcer told US viewers at the beginning of the broadcast that the program was “sponsored by the 2001 Aztek from Pontiac.” The announcer was not kidding. Less than a minute later, a paid commercial spot for the Aztek aired, touting the vehicle's ability to be used as a camping tent. About nine minutes later, the four remaining contestants of the reality-based game show met host Jeff Probst who informed them of a “reward challenge.” The prize to be rewarded, as described by Probst, was “a Pontiac Aztek; this is a car that converts into a tent... it's pretty cool.” Later in the program, in what was termed by Bill Carter of *The New York Times* as “perhaps the longest in-program commercial in television history” (Carter, 2001, p. A1), the winner of the challenge, Colby, is given his prize. As Colby (and the camera) look over the car, he says,

Look at that thing. She looks good. How wild is this thing? God, look at the interior. Now this is a trip. It's awesome. I mean, the car is way cooler than I thought it was going to be.... And it's got some of the neatest amenities a vehicle has ever had. You've got a stereo in the back of it, not to mention a huge tent.
content track the democratic potential and embodiment of media technologies and genres. Critics wonder if the growth of commercial influences – giving such a loud and self-interested voice to the selling function at the expense of other information and perspectives – subverts the democratic potential of information and entertainment systems.

The essay discusses the temptation the media feel in promoting both their own holdings as well as the products of advertisers, using as a case study the promotion of Survivor and Survivor advertisers on CBS’ The Early Show. Ultimately, CBS’s use of news to publicize Survivor sets the promotional bar higher than it had been before for television news and paints one particularly disturbing picture of the role of news in commercial culture. Although this role may be beneficial to corporate owners and advertisers, it also undermines the needs of a democratic society.

News, Democracy, and Commercialism

News, as a supplier of information and social analysis, is viewed by governments, scholars and journalists as a special genre of media. Although certainly entertainment media – with its ability to educate and enflame the passions – may do more than merely entertain, journalism, in its ideal Western form, is designed to pillar democracy. We may think of the news as giving us “just the facts,” but in a modern society, the role of news is more complex. In a democracy, diversity of information – necessary for a full consideration of social ideas – is key. No one sector or partisan force should dominate the news, but rather the media “should be organized in a way that enables diverse social groups and organizations to express alternative viewpoints” (Curran, 1991, p. 103). Sometimes this means giving us unpopular views, including ideas that we may not want to be exposed to, but that we need for a healthy democracy. Similarly, news should be relevant, offering us information and perspectives that are central in making important social and political decisions. Democratically relevant news should ideally facilitate social and political participation; encourage citizenship, active engagement with the social activism and organizing; and “create the conditions in which alternative viewpoints and perspectives are brought into play” (Curran, 1991, p. 102).

To approach these goals, journalism must avoid any one voice dominating its discourse. Although the typical first amendment approach may see government as a dangerous influence on news, commercial interests loom at least as large as the state as a danger to democratically vibrant news. “Commercial interests” here refer both to the more general sense of the term (the profit motive overwhelming content decisions) and the more specific sense of the term (commercial advertisers overwhelming content decisions). In the ideal world of journalism, then, there should be a barrier separating the business side from the editorial side to protect the institution’s democratic function. As Ben Bagdikian argues,
“Within journalism, the ideal policy has always been proudly referred to as ‘The Wall of Separation Between Church and State.’ The newsroom was the Church, and the business side of the news company, the secular State” (2000, p. xiv).

McChesney writes that it is naive to think that modern journalism ever had such pure separation. Professionalism in news, including the norm of objectivity, was created in large part as a way to effectively deliver audiences to advertisers, for instance (McChesney, 1999, p. 49). Historians and critics have highlighted the earlier tendencies of advertising to “camouflage” themselves as news articles (Lawson, 1988; Baker, 1994) and the power of major advertisers, like tobacco companies, to influence media content throughout this century (Bagdikian, 2000; Baker, 1994). Focusing on television, the role of commercial interests, including the advertising industry, in shaping the very foundational structure and assumptions of US broadcasting systems is a major theme in the research of scholars like Barnouw (1978) and McChesney (1993, 1999).

Critics have also argued that the danger of the commercial voice overwhelming news – especially television news – is even more of a reality in the post-1990s than before this time. Television news has found itself in a highly competitive environment for ratings because of the increased competition generally in television (via such delivery systems as cable and satellites) and the creation of additional news outlets like Fox News. Personal Video Recorders (also known as Digital Video Recorders) like TiVo make the recording of programming – and the avoiding of commercials – even easier than VCRs and have encouraged advertisers to demand more promotion than the typical (and easily avoidable) spot advertisement (Bernstein, 2001). The increased expenses for “star anchor” salaries and high-tech news and weather equipment and changes in news organization ownership may stress the economic bottom line for news divisions (for reviews of these factors, see Alger, 1998; Bagdikian, 2000; Cohen, 1997; Croteau & Hoynes, 2001; Hickey, 1998; McAllister, 2002; McChesney, 1999). These factors alter news in several ways, including a stress on “ratings friendly” news (fast-paced news about celebrities and scandal) and a pressure to avoid criticism of advertisers and other business partners. This context also influences journalism toward more coverage of commercial activities and to serve as promotional outlets for advertisers and corporate owners. Such pressures are profoundly antidemocratic and encourage passivity. As Richard Cohen, a former CBS news producer, summarizes, “TV cannot sell successfully to an audience that is more provoked than pleased, more challenged than cheered” (Cohen, 1997, p. 33).

If news about media and celebrities may attract viewers, then news about innovative, giant and/or shocking advertising campaigns also serve this function, and at the same time flatter advertisers. We see this trend in coverage of Super Bowl advertising. Newspaper coverage of Super Bowl commercials increased significantly from the mid-1980s to the late-1990s (McAllister, 1999). The day after the Super Bowl, it is typical for the morning news programs of ABC, CBS, CNN and NBC to review the best and worst Super Bowl commercials in lengthy segments. The week before the 2001 Super Bowl, CNN interviewed Barbara Lippert from the trade journal Adweek about the upcoming ads, CBS’s The Early Show interviewed the actors on the Budweiser “Whassup?” commercials, and ABC’s 20/20 aired a profile of TV commercial director Joe Pytka. Many commercials receive free airtime when they are excerpted during these stories, and such coverage treats advertising more as entertainment discourse rather than product-information discourse. Similarly, the news loves to cover especially shocking or provocative campaigns, such as the controversial advertising of Benetton (Falk, 1997; Tine, 1997) and Calvin Klein (Tucker, 1998), often showing the ads during these news reports.

Perhaps more influential are the promotional pressures from corporate ties that weigh upon news organizations. In the US, the elimination in 1995 of the Financial Interest and Syndication Rules encouraged the purchasing of television networks by movie studios (Walker & Ferguson, 1998), further advancing a trend in media concentration that had been evident at least since the 1980s. With such corporate ownership, pressure may also be placed on news divisions to fit in with the larger entertainment imperative of media corporations. Journalists in such organizations are concerned about news divisions being subordinate to the larger entertainment enterprise when mergers occur between news organizations and entertainment corporations (Turow, 1994). Indeed, the changing corporate name of what was once the Time empire illustrates this potential subordination. The early name, Time, Inc., symbolized the primacy of the news function; the corporation shared the same name with the flagship division, the journalistic Time magazine. After the 1989 merger with Warner Communications Inc., however, Time had to share the corporate name with its larger entertainment sibling when Time Warner, Inc. was formed. News was symbolically devalued even more in 2001 when the corporation once again changed its name to AOL-Time Warner, Inc., as the corporation added a huge Internet component. The place of news in the organization, like the placement of Time in the name, has slipped in stature in the organization, being from the primary function to just being one more cog in a larger entertainment machine. Few would argue now that Time magazine is the most visible or powerful division in AOL-Time Warner.

Concerns about the subordination of news in entertainment-driven media corporations are reasonable given the use of news outlets to promote corporate product. “Plugola” on television news, where news stories become publicity-based coverage of corporate holdings, are routinely found on certain news outlets, especially morning news programs, local news and prime-time news. Given the added pressure to create ratings friendly journalism – which includes coverage of entertainment products – the synergistic pressure to promote is difficult to resist. The last episode of Seinfeld in 1998, for example, was not only heavily publicized in fawning coverage by NBC and NBC owned and operated stations, but also by news organizations that benefited from Seinfeld’s syndication deals, such as CNN and CBS (McAllister, 2002). Such heavy coverage pushes other, more newsworthy topics, off the news agenda. In addition, often the promotional function of such stories is hidden from viewers. Many of these outlets...
do not have policies about disclosing the corporate ties of news topics for “plugola” stories (Seitz, 2000).

Such is the modern journalistic context in which Survivor maneuvered. But Survivor also found itself in a genre – reality-based programming – that was especially product friendly and at a network – CBS – that was in need of both advertiser-friendly demographics and a higher rated morning news program. The next section explores these factors.

Reality-based Programming and Commercial Influence

Reality-based programs such as Survivor and Temptation Island are attractive to the broadcast networks for several reasons. Such programming, for example, is often cheap to produce, or at least cheaper to produce when compared to star-oriented sitcoms and evening melodramas (Flint, 2001). In addition, such programs stand out as appearing more spontaneous and unplanned than other highly scripted prime-time fare. Of course, the “spontaneity” of reality based programs (much like the spontaneity of news programming) is to a large extent manufactured with careful planning in pre-production (through the hand-picked selection of telegenic participants), production (through the artificial premise of the programs and built-in plot complications like Survivor’s Immunity Challenges) and post-production (through heavy editing). Nevertheless, the “reality” part of reality-based creates an image of an “anything can happen” environment. And much of the “anything” often involves the attention-grabbing power of sexual innuendo (such as in Fox’s hyper-hormoned Temptation Island) and over-the-top gross outs (like NBC’s Fear Factor) which are particularly enticing to young, advertising-friendly audiences. Survivor, with its flirtatious, barely clothed attractive castaways and bug-eating challenges, provides both.

Reality-based programs offer advertising and promotional advantages as well. The genre is receptive to product placement, a topic much discussed in the critical scholar literature (Andersen, 1995; Fuller, 1997; Miller, 1990; Wasko, 1994). Product placement may not only add to the financial bottom line of a movie or television program, but may also enhance the promotional punch of the movie/show when product placers create their own advertisements touting the connection (Avery & Ferraro, 2000; McAllister, 2000). Although certainly not unheard of on television in the 1980s and 1990s, product placement was normally a domain of film more than television because of regulatory rules with broadcasting and the pressures of juggling the demands of competing brands (Andersen, 1995, p. 45).

One study found that there was a higher proportion of product placement in genres like documentaries and prime-time news magazines than there were in highly scripted genres like sitcoms (Avery & Ferraro, 2000). As Advertising Age columnist Bob Garfield pointed out in an April 3, 2001 appearance on ABC’s Good Morning America, programs with a strong promise of becoming syndicated are not attractive for product placement since the in-program advertisement may alienate future advertisers. Because reality-based shows do not usually have much of a future in syndication as repeat airings blunt their image of spontaneity, product placement is more likely in the genre. Also, since the creation of a more “real” atmosphere is often used as a justification for product placement (Miller, 1990), program executives may feel audiences will accept embedded products in reality-based programs more than in other types of programs. The 2001–2002 television season saw other product-friendly programs besides Survivor. Other tie-ins include Taco Bell in the Fox program Murder in Small Town X and Ford in the WB’s No Boundaries (the title itself is a Ford slogan). In fact, the producer of No Boundaries has implied that the WB was lukewarm about picking up the program until a product placement deal was secured with Ford (Poniewozik, 2001).

There is one last promotional advantage to reality-based programs. Given the heightened image of realism and spontaneity, it may be easier to justify using news programs to promote such shows than to justify the promotion of sit-coms. After all, since the programs are “real,” the events that take place in the program may be reported as news – at least marginally more than plot complications such as Rachel’s pregnancy on Friends. It is with these promotional pressures in mind that we move to the next section: looking at the extensive coverage of Survivor on CBS’s The Early Show.

Survivor as News Plugola

Morning network news shows in the US have always been a mix of news and entertainment. One Today Show broadcast in the 1950s featured both mathematician Norbert Wiener and ballplayer Mickey Mantle, and the national morning news format itself was only truly established as a popular one with the regular appearance of a chimpanzee, J. Fred Muggs, on NBC’s program (Metz, 1977). However, all three major morning TV news programs are produced by the networks’ news divisions, not the entertainment divisions. Traditionally, CBS’s morning news was the most news oriented of the three. It comes out of the news division with the most storied history, and was the first all-news morning program (Gates, 1978, p. 104). One illustrative incident involving the clash of news values and entertainment pressures occurred when the executive producer of the program in the early 1980s, George Merlis, butted heads with other network personnel over his decision to not extensively cover the final episode of M*A*S*H on the then titled CBS Morning News (Boyer, 1988, p. 216).

Things have changed since then. As will be seen, The Early Show reached an absurdist level in its very heavy coverage of its sibling program Survivor. What has facilitated this change? Besides the general pressures on news to entertain and promote that were discussed in the previous section, CBS had additional
contextual factors which may have encouraged the television network to plug hard the reality-based show. *Survivor,* for example, debuted in the summer of 2000. This timing is significant. Throughout the 1990s, summer was a time when the erosion of the ratings of the US broadcast networks accelerated because of new programming shown by cable networks and the reruns aired by the broadcast networks (Kim, 1999). The successful airing of original programming by the broadcast networks was seen as a way to slow down or even reverse the losses to their cable competitors. In addition, CBS's ratings traditionally have been skewed toward older groups than is ideally desired by advertisers. The network saw the reality program as a way to attract younger viewers before the fall TV season (Schneider & Adalian, 2000). The cultivation of *Survivor* and other reality-based programming — less scripted and acted than other typical prime-time entertainment — was also beneficial to CBS as insurance in case of a writers' and actors' strike in Hollywood in Summer 2001 (Adalian & Schneider, 2001). Finally, the “reality-based” element of *Survivor* did give it a bit more rationale to be covered more like a sports story than a highly scripted weekly sitcom or drama would reasonably allow, at least at that time. Other factors had less to do with the importance of the prime time schedule, and more to do with the situation involving CBS's morning news program, *The Early Show.* Revamped in 1999 at a cost of $30 million with a new name and new hosts — including highly paid Bryant Gumbel, the former NBC Today Show host known for tough interviewing — *The Early Show* was at first a ratings disappointment. Viewership was so poor that some local affiliates were considering preempting at least part of the network program for local news (Trigoboff, 2000).

These factors combined to turn *The Early Show* into a promotional flak for *Survivor.* Table 10.1 compares the coverage of the first US version of *Survivor* by the news divisions of ABC, CBS and NBC. One could argue that the premise and popularity of *Survivor* had some legitimate news value. In fact, *Survivor* I was covered fairly extensively by the two major broadcast news competitors of CBS. As table 10.1 shows, ABC devoted 21 news stories to *Survivor,* while NBC aired 15. The program was also covered by major news outlets like the *New York Times* and *Time* magazine. A key issue, though, is the boundary between adequate coverage and overkill/public relations flack coverage. Table 10.1 illustrates that the boundary may have been crossed, as CBS devoted five times as many stories to the program as the next nearest competitor, ABC.

CBS's coverage of *Survivor* began over four-and-a-half-months before the first episode of *Survivor* even aired, with *The Early Show* co-host Jane Clayson’s interview of Executive Producer Mark Burnett on January 10, 2000. Five stories on CBS were about *Survivor* — all on the morning news — before the program even debuted. Four of these stories were broadcast the week before the first episode on May 31, including one that morning. And as the time toward the debut approached, the hyperbole of the news stories increased. The first story on January 10 was introduced with a simple description as Clayson noted, in an allusion to ABC’s then-hot *Who Wants to be a Millionaire?*, “Being stranded on a desert island would have been the only way you could have missed the network game show craze sweeping the nation. Of course, that would also make you the perfect contestant on the newest show to enter the fray.” On May 27, Saturday host Russ Mitchell begins a story on the show by citing another source with “The New York Daily News calls it the wildest TV show in history.” On May 30, Clayson labels the program as “eagerly anticipated” and on May 31 begins the story with “Tonight, the long-awaited *Survivor* series kicks off here on CBS, giving us all a front-row seat to a unique television event . . .”

At this point, CBS is using *The Early Show* to plug *Survivor.* However, after the show debuts and becomes a ratings hit, the relationship between the two programs begin to benefit the morning news show more than the other way around, with *Survivor* being used as a ratings hook for *The Early Show*. Bryant Gumbel, the co-host with the more “hard news” journalistic reputation, becomes more actively involved with *Survivor* stories on June 7. Contestants kicked off the island were interviewed in multiple segments the following morning. The ubiquitous “round table” discussions are introduced the morning after the first episode, with minor celebrities and authors with their own books to tout appearing on the program to dissect the previous night’s episode. Tie-in stories focused on such topics as a Big Apple *Survivor* contest, the benefits of such *Survivor* activities as using mud as a skin moisturizer and eating insects for protein, and an interview with an astrologer who tries to predict future developments based upon the contestants’ star signs.

CBS News went on to promote the second *Survivor* series even more heavily than the first installment. Now *Survivor* was a proven ratings winner and
Table 10.2 Number of news stories devoted to Survivor II: Australian Outback on US national broadcast TV networks, January 1, 2001 to May 4, 2001

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Network</th>
<th>Morning Pre</th>
<th>Morning Post</th>
<th>Evening News Pre</th>
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<td>169</td>
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Note: Stories were collected from the database Lexis/Nexis. A story was only counted once in a newscast, even if it might have been repeated later in that same newscast. If the same story appeared in a different newscast on the same station later that day, however, it was counted again. "Co-op" stories during the morning news programs that are made available to local affiliates if that affiliate shows no local news break, a rarity in most markets, were also excluded. Although brief "teaser" segments that preview upcoming news stories (themselves a kind of plugola) are listed by Lexis/Nexis, these segments were not included in the count unless the anchors/reporters commented at length on the forthcoming story. Late night news was also excluded. "Pre" is the number of news stories aired prior to the May 3, 2001 final episode; "Post" is the number of news stories aired on May 4, 2001, after the episode aired.

advertisers were spending three times as much to sponsor this version as the previous – as much as $12.5 million to be a sponsor compared to the earlier $4 million (Flint, 2001). Table 10.2 shows increased coverage by CBS for the second Survivor compared to the first during a shorter time frame (four months compared to Survivor I's eight months). As this table shows, CBS devoted a whopping 169 news stories to Survivor, all airing on The Early Show. This is over ten times the amount of coverage that the closest competitor, NBC, devoted to it. While CBS aired 61 more Survivor stories for the Australian series versus the Borneo series, ABC decreased its coverage by 13 stories (NBC stayed about the same). As with the first installment, coverage became heavier as the season finale approached. Of the 23 days that The Early Show broadcast in April 2001 (minus Sundays), for example, viewers saw Survivor stories on 20 of those days. As with the Borneo version, The Early Show devoted virtually all of its two hours – 12 segments – to the finale and to the post-Survivor prime time special that was hosted by, appropriately enough, Bryant Gumbel.

From a more qualitative point of view, The Early Show did more than just plug Survivor; it was overwhelmed by Survivor. The reality-based show symbolically co-opted The Early Show and any journalistic credibility that the show may have had in both the 2000 and early 2001 versions. The program gave itself up without a touch of irony, turning a program produced by the News Division of CBS into a virtual two-hour promotional spot in many cases. This promotional ethos is illustrated in many ways.

The graphics and audio of The Early Show would often feature Survivor iconography. Wednesdays became labeled by the co-hosts as “Survivor Wednesdays,” featuring previews of that night’s episode. The following post-episode installment was “Survivor Thursdays,” with the panels and interviews. The graphics and music of Survivor were integrated into the graphics and music of The Early Show, often signifying when a Survivor-oriented segment was about to air.

Nor were the Survivor-segments relegated to “soft-news” times, such as during the second hour or only after all hard news had been exhausted. On “Survivor Thursdays,” in the opening recap of major stories, the last Survivor happenings would be equated with world events. A typical teaser segment from March 9, 2001 begins with co-hosts Gumbel and Clayson summarizing the major news items of the day:

Gumbel: Memorials are planned for the weekend for the victims of the Santana school shooting.
Clayson: The House gives President Bush his first legislative victory, approving the heart of his tax cut.
Clayson: And Survivor's new Barramundi tribe claims its first victim.

In this opening, then, reality-based game show contestants become “victims” who are linguistically equated with murdered school children. For 16 weeks in 2000 and 2001, Survivor was always the second or third most important news story on Thursday mornings for CBS.

Immediately after these opening teasers, but before going to the news updates, the two co-hosts, whose reporting credentials are stressed on the CBS News website, would chat about the latest episode in the sign-on and sign-off segments. Such chats, in what could be termed “fan talk,” often would discuss developments on the show with the gravity of political coups. One example, which aired August 3, 2000 from two locations (the Republican National Convention in Philadelphia and their studios in New York), mixed Survivor and politics:

Gumbel: And good morning. Welcome to The Early Show on this Thursday morning. It may be a split program, but it's still Survivor Thursday here in New York. Jane Clayson's in Philly. Were you as shocked as I was that Gervase is out?
Clayson: I was - I was completely shocked, Bryant.
Gumbel: I was stunned.
Clayson: The moment that Richard got immunity, we were having a little party in my room, the room exploded because everybody knew, and then when Gervase got voted out, they almost voted us out of the hotel, so loud.
Gumbel: You know, he was - he was below the radar screen with me. I thought for sure that it was Sean's turn or maybe Susan or Kelly, depending on which way it broke. That Gervase wound up getting four, maybe five votes - we don't know - shocked me.
Clayson: Well, so many people thought that Gervase would take it all, and the fact that he was voted out last night, it - people here can't believe it. Unbelievable.
Gumbel: A stunner, a stunner.
Clayson: Yeah. It really is.
Gumbel: We’re going to be talking with Gervase in our second hour, Jane, as you know.
Clayson: At 8:15, right, Bry?
Gumbel: Yeah.
Clayson: It also turns out this morning that one of the biggest Survivor fans at the convention is a member of the Bush family. Marvin Bush, George W.’s brother, will join us in just a few moments.

“What about Gervase?” Jane Clayson later asked Mr. Bush in the above-mentioned interview.

A new wrinkle was added in the plugola for Survivor II: the use of former Survivor contestants as commentators, guest co-hosts, and even reporters for The Early Show. It may be natural that ex-Survivors would appear on the Thursday Round Table discussions. But when acting as reporters, these faux-journalists would report on non-Survivor stories. For example, on the day after the 2001 Super Bowl, CBS aired a graphic-labeled “HealthWatch” story, meant to explain a recent medical development or health practice. Clayson introduces the story with

Six percent of American workers are expected to call in sick today, a day in which sales of antacids are expected to be 26 percent above normal. If you think all that has anything to do with all the partying that people did on Super Bowl Sunday, you would be right. Here in Tampa the parties were going all weekend and our special Survivor correspondent Jenna Lewis was among the revelers.

Lewis then appears in the video package where she hops from party to party. Such is the nature of “Health Reports” in the post-Survivor era: a report on Super Bowl parties using the reporting skills of a former game show contestant. Additional stories in this category include an earlier Lewis piece about the People’s Choice Awards where she again reported on the party scene and designer dresses (January 8), Gervase Peterson reporting on Media Day at the Super Bowl (January 26), and Jeff Varner at the National Cheer and Dance Championships (April 12). Other Survivor celebrities were used as authoritative sources on non-Survivor stories, such as host Jeff Probst being interviewed about the Puppy Chow mobile dog clinic (April 17) and Alicia Calaway, described as “the buffest babe in the Outback” by Clayson, who talked about personal training (April 19) and plugged her then-upcoming stories in the magazines Muscle and Fitness and Sports Illustrated for Women. And on May 2 – in a move that symbolized the subordination of journalism to promotion – Richard Hatch, the winner of Survivor I, sat at the anchor desk and co-hosted The Early Show, replacing Bryant Gumbel who was preparing for the prime-time special.

As implied above, like Survivor itself, Survivor news stories are very commodity friendly. Serving as “multi-leveled commercials” that tout two products in one promotional space (McAllister, 1996, p. 158), Survivor stories would not only plug the prime-time program, but often would also plug other products or media outlets. It was mentioned earlier that panelists on the Friday morning Round Tables would often have something to promote themselves, such as books or websites that would be illustrated with a graphic while they were introduced. In an especially commodified installment on January 29, 2001 that illustrates the commercial essence of these segments, one of the panelists was Fred Thomas, described as “one of the ‘Whassup?’” guys from the much-aired Budweiser commercials. Similarly, one brief story (May 1) discussed Survivor finalists appearing on milk-mustache ads.

Often multi-leveled promotional stories about Survivor would mention or show the sponsors of that program, as in the Aztek example discussed at the beginning of this essay. When asked if she wore her own designs during the contest, Survivor-participant and shoe-designer Elisabeth Filarski observed that “I did not wear my own design in the outback. We wore Reeboks in the outback. Very cool and very functional.” During the coverage of Survivor II, Doritos was mentioned in at least six different segments (on February 15, February 16 (three stories), March 15 and May 4), and a clip of the Survivor participants celebrating over a Doritos offering was shown at least twice. An especially Doritos-friendly exchange took place on February 16, when former contestant Mitchell Olson was interviewed by Jane Clayson and substitute co-anchor John Roberts:

Olson: At that point, I was so hungry and so tired, really, the million dollars didn’t mean anything to me. I’m not kidding.
Roberts: You would have – you would have taken it and blown it all on a bag of Doritos, right?
Olson: Right. Exactly.
Clayson: It was a bag of Doritos, right? B – Doritos and Coke?
Olson: Doritos and Coke right away, and I remember saying to the [CBS-hired] psychiatrist, I was like, “This means more to me than being out there.” That’s the first thing I said to her, and it really did.
Roberts: Interesting.
Clayson: About five minutes after you made those final comments – Right? – you were chowing down.
Olson: Right. A – absolutely.
Roberts: I wonder where in the DSM4 scale that one lies? “The most important thing in my life right now is this bag of Doritos.”

For the sponsors of Survivor, this becomes a “value-added” benefit of the sponsorship. Not only do they receive heavy commercial time during Survivor, sponsorship tags during the program (“Brought to you by . . .”), and product placement in Survivor, but, with The Early Show’s heavy coverage, they also often receive product placement in the news.

Some stories could be described as touting products that were part of the growing “Survivor Industry.” Looking at Survivor II, stories were aired promoting Survivor-oriented websites (January 26, featuring an interview with a college
student who “dropped out of college to run a site called SurvivorFire.com”), Survivor-themed vacations (March 29) and training programs for potential Survivor contestants (April 26). One story not only promoted Survivor but also plugged into CBS’s synergistic corporate environment. The music group Destiny’s Child was interviewed on May 1 (the week of the Survivor II finale) by weather anchor Mark McEwen. The topic of the interview was their new single and music video, entitled “Survivor.” McEwen begins the interview by showing the group’s CD and saying “Hot little record. Title track is already the number one song on the radio. The video, if you haven’t seen it, you haven’t been watching. It’s everywhere as well.” By “everywhere,” McEwen meant MTV and VH-1, two sibling organizations of Viacom, the company that also owns CBS. He also meant CBS, because scenes of the music video were integrated into CBS promotions for Survivor aired during that week.

Discussion and Conclusion

Survivor III: Africa debuted on October 11, 2001, exactly one month after the events of September 11 in New York, Washington, DC and Pennsylvania. Of course this event dominated US and world news and reappropriated, for a time at least, the cultural connotations of the word “survivor.” Logical questions to ask are, did September 11 and the subsequent US invasion of Afghanistan recontextualize the program and the reality-based genre for viewers, and did these events in turn recontextualize journalists’ roles – specifically, CBS News – in a complicated world?

Some commentators wondered if Americans could no longer stomach reality-based programs given the intensity of September 11 and the accompanying video footage (Chunovic, 2001). However, although other reality-based programs failed to perform, in terms of the popularity of Survivor III, the ratings did indeed decrease from the previous two versions, but the program was still considered a solid performer with future versions planned (Friedman, 2001).

Similarly, CBS’s The Early Show still promoted Survivor III, but not to nearly the extent of the Borneo and Australia installments. Coverage took on a more somber tone, especially at first, but nevertheless maintained its promotional ethos. In a preview airing September 24, weather anchor Mark McEwen introduced the feature with “While the show has certainly taken on a very different tone in the scheme of things, millions are sure not only to appreciate the entertainment, but the distraction as well.” Gone were the panel Round Tables, most of the ancillary tie-in stories and the “fan talk,” but multiple interviews with the cast-off participants remained. The January 11 news program—exactly four months after September 11 and the day after the final episode of Survivor III—was, like the old days, dominated by stories and interviews about the last remaining Survivor. Given the current state of corporate media and their willingness to use the news (as well as other genres of programming) to promote themselves and their advertisers, it is not much of a stretch to argue that the media will have a short memory about the sober restraint placed on promotional efforts encouraged by September 11.

The events in Afghanistan can help us to understand the implications of Survivor in other ways. It was earlier argued that two ideal functions of journalism in a democracy are to create access to diverse and relevant news. What are the implications of Survivor coverage for these criteria? Clearly, Survivor was a dominant news topic on CBS during the run of the first two versions; perhaps, in fact, it was the dominant news topic for the network during Survivor II’s run. Lexis/Nexis, the main database used for this essay to calculate the number of Survivor stories on The Early Show, does not indicate the time length of stories. However, based upon selected taped episodes and the transcripts of all stories, one may conservatively estimate that, for Survivor II, CBS News devoted over six-and-a-half hours to covering that one television series. Perhaps, though, such promotional activity is harmless. Why should we care that a morning news program is used as a flack for an entertainment show? One reason we should care is that other possible stories may not be covered—or at least not covered as extensively as they should be—because of the attention devoted to Survivor. Thus, the large amount of coverage about this TV show should be placed into the context of other, non-self-interested and more politically or socially significant stories. How does Survivor compare to coverage of other important events, say events in pre-September 11 Afghanistan? Taking the same four-month period as Survivor II (January 1, 2001 to May 4, 2001), and counting all stories on the Evening News, The Early Show, and prime-time news magazines, CBS News aired a total of 12 stories about Afghanistan.7 These stories were a combined 7 minutes, 40 seconds of airtime, or half the time that was devoted to interviewing one contestant on the one April 27 installment of The Early Show discussed at the beginning of this essay. Ten of these Afghanistan stories were 30 seconds or less. Critics have argued that over the last decades the television networks have seriously decreased the amount of international news coverage and have increased coverage of entertainment and celebrity (Alger, 1998; Cohen, 1997; McChesney, 1999). In the Survivor-versus-Afghanistan comparison, there may be dire consequences. Without reasonable coverage of Afghanistan and the immediate surrounding regions, US citizens may not have had the proper historical, social and cultural context to understand the events of September 11 and US action subsequent to these events.

Besides covering many different important topics, news also must be relevant, encouraging democratic participation and active engagement in social decisions. News should facilitate how to become involved in our communities and how to maximize our voices to make progressive social change. But stories about TV programs such as Survivor do not encourage such participation. Rather, the only things they encourage are the watching of television and the purchasing of sponsors’ products. With their promotion and celebration of a popular television program, these stories are anti-democratic, encouraging viewers to speculate
more on who is going to be voted off the island next, rather than how to become involved in local politics or civic organizations.

Fortunately, a few critics in the popular, trade and political media have not let the negative implications of CBS's Survivor plugula go unnoticed (Miller, 2002; Rosenberg, 2001), including the former president of NBC news asking in a column for the Columbia Journalism Review, “Can CBS News Survive Survivor?” (Grossman, 2000). Other works, focusing on changing the corporate and promotional status quo – including revitalizing the public service mission of journalism -- are essentially primers designed to help citizens as well as media activists resist and critique the power of large corporate media and intrusive advertising (Coco, 1996; Jacobson & Mazur, 1995; Klein, 1999; Lasn, 1999; McChesney & Nichols, 2002). By developing alternative media outlets, highlighting resistant practices of the consumer/citizen and recognizing the influential force that grassroots organizing and lobbying may have, such engaged scholarship argues that it is imperative and possible to become agents of change for – and not just survivors of -- commercial culture.

Notes

1 Thirty-three of CBS's stories were “Survivor Marketwatch” stories, about a financial investment contest using a Survivor label. Many of these stories mentioned Survivor and/or showed clips from Survivor. Even if these stories were removed, however, coverage still significantly increased from the American version compared to the British version.

2 NBC's coverage of Survivor II also was connected to plugula. Survivor II was scheduled against NBC powerhouse, Friends, and NBC's The Today Show exploited this fact by discussing Friends in six of its 16 Survivor stories. Tellingly, one Survivor story that both NBC and ABC covered but that CBS did not cover (despite the latter's 169 Survivor-oriented segments) was a story critical of the program: a lawsuit filed by former contestant Stacey Stillman arguing that contestants' voting was influenced by the producer of the program.

3 Ten of the 12 CBS news stories about Afghanistan focused on the destruction of the giant Buddha statues by the Taliban in March, a story that had a strong visual component. Only one of these stories was longer than one minute.

References


Constructing Youth
Media, Youth, and the Politics of Representation

Sharon R. Mazzarella

Youth have once again become the object of public analysis. Headlines proliferate like dispatches from a combat zone, frequently coupling youth and violence in the interests of promoting a new kind of commonsense relationship.

Henry Giroux (1996, p. 27)

Historically within the field of media studies there have been two primary and often contradictory strains of scholarship on youth. The first, quantitative studies of the effects of media on youth have been the standard in the United States since the middle of the twentieth century. Grounded in the theories and methods of social psychology, and growing out of public concern about media, such studies have sought to understand the influence the media have on young people. In contrast, youth scholarship in the cultural studies tradition, as defined first by the work of scholars at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in Great Britain and later in the United States, has sought primarily to understand the ways in which youth incorporate mass culture into their lives and the ways in which they create their own culture. Although often contradictory, both of these traditions are audience-centered – i.e. asking questions either about how the audience is affected by media or what the audience does with media. In contrast, a more recent and growing strain of inquiry within media studies is to examine media constructions and representations of youth. It is this focus on “representational politics” (Giroux, 1998, p. 28) as exemplified in the work of such scholars as Henry Jenkins, Henry Giroux, Mike Males, Larry Grossberg, Donna Gaines, and others with which this essay, and my own scholarship, is concerned. This essay examines the way in which “youth” is constructed in our culture, focusing specifically on the media’s role in this process. Following Joe Austin and Michael Nevin Willard’s (1998) lead, “youth” in this essay refers to young people roughly between the ages of twelve to twenty-four. Although I predominantly focus on