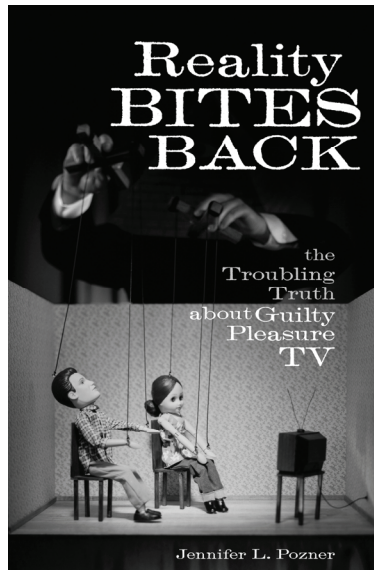


Reality Bites Back!

A Rain and Thunder Interview with Media Activist Jennifer Pozner

Rain and Thunder had the opportunity to speak with media activist Jennifer Pozner who is the founder and executive director of Women In Media & News, a national media analysis, education, and advocacy group. After ten years of research on reality television programming, Jennifer recently published the groundbreaking work *Reality Bites Back: The Troubling Truth About Guilty Pleasure TV* (Seal Press, 2010). The book critically exposes the pop cultural backlash against women's rights and social progress through the lens of reality TV. Jennifer talked with us about key points from *Reality Bites Back* and about the importance of being critical media consumers and activists.



Rain and Thunder (R&T): Thank you for taking the time to speak with us. We've been encouraged and inspired by your important feminist media activist work over the years. We're excited about the publication of your new book, *Reality Bites Back: The Troubling Truth About Guilty Pleasure TV*. Can you share with us why you wrote it?

Jennifer Pozner (JP): I felt like it was incredibly important that we start to have a real and deep conversation in this country about what media companies want us to believe about ourselves at the beginning of the 21st century. Who they want us to think we are, and what they want us to think we value. That means what they want us to believe about ourselves based on our race, gender, and socioeconomic status, and what the possibilities are for us in terms of financial success, academic or professional achievements, romantic love, or the lack of any of those things.

The book looks at an entire decade of television that is growing in its influence and the amount of the network and cable prime time dial that it eats up. A higher percentage of programming is unscripted every year and from the very beginning, this genre that's such a moneymaker for corporate media outlets has been based on very regressive and very misogynistic notions.

R&T: Your work was informed by Susan Faludi's important book, *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women*, which documented the attacks on women's rights in the 1980's after significant gains were made during the second wave of the women's movement. Your book continues in this tradition of journalistic re-

search to uncover the backlash in reality TV which you call "our most vivid example of a pop cultural backlash against women's rights and social progress." Can you talk more about this?

JP: Faludi's book *Backlash* was so formative for me when I first read it in 1992. I wrote the chapter "'I Would Be a Servant to Him: New Millennium, Same Old Backlash'" as my homage to what Faludi did in that book.

In terms of the backlash, if you knew nothing about American women or people of color other than what you saw on reality television, you would believe that the women's rights movement and the civil rights movement never happened.

Reality TV creates a form of gender essentialism that basically says that

women are just gold diggers, stupid, desperate if they're single, incompetent if they're workers, submissive if they're stay-at-home moms, or bad wives and mothers if they work outside the home. The only real value they have, and the thing that defines why somebody should love them or not, is their appearance. Those were the basic and base notions about women built into the very first network reality shows from *Who Wants to Marry a Multi-Millionaire* and *The Bachelor* to *America's Next Top Model* and *Wife Swap*.

One of the biggest ways the anti-feminist backlash plays out in reality television is through the hyper emphasis on the infantilizing "princess fairytale romance" quest for prince charming. This script says that dating, marriage, and weddings are supposedly the single most important thing women could ever want or aspire to. This maps very closely to decades of backlash fare in film, television and news media. What are *The Bachelor* and *Married By America* and other dating, mating, and wedding-industrial-complex shows if not the unscripted television version of that infamously inaccurate *Newsweek* cover story in the 1980's that said single women had a better chance of being killed by a terrorist than getting married over 40? I use the phrase "cautionary tale" a lot in the book because that's what a lot of this is about — the idea that women who have ambition and who have standards are doomed to misery.

There have been very problematic and bigoted notions about people of color from the very beginning of reality TV as well, though they were generally more marginalized and invisible. It's important that when we talk about race in reality TV that we understand that the landscape

overall in news and entertainment media is one in which people of color are vastly underrepresented in number and also behind the scenes in terms of media production, distribution, and ownership. Across the board, the people who are setting the agendas and making the decisions, the vast majority are white and the vast majority are men. In terms of content, again the vast majority of lead actors and story lines are cast with and built around white actors. And when news media cover people of color it is disproportionately in stories of crime and drugs, or as victims.

If we do not see the plurality of our population represented both in terms of number and story lines, as well as accuracy in news media, then the positioning of people of color in reality TV takes on more significance. You end up having *Flavor of Love* and all of the cable shows filled with stereotypes which replace the marginalization with (finally) diverse casting — but diverse casting framed in a way that reinforces all the worst of American history in terms of ideas about people of color.

So there is more representation of people of color, especially women of color, in reality TV but they end up being portrayed as hypersexual, ignorant divas who are always about to fly off the handle and get into some sort of verbal or physical fight, or as “hos” and “bitches.” We encounter many key stereotypes including “The Angry Black Woman,” “The Spicy Latina,” and the submissive or passive Asian woman.

R&T: This is one of the reasons why we need to critique the framing of reality television as unscripted “reality” because so many damaging and dangerous stereotypes are essentialized and normalized. Can you share more on the extensive manipulation that goes into crafting “unscripted” programming?

JP: What many people do not understand about reality television is that when producers and network executives say “We can’t put words in people’s mouths,” that’s a lie. There’s a practice called “Frankenbite editing” which is a widespread industry tactic in which bits and pieces of a person’s conversation from one day, and then another day, and yet another day can be spliced together to completely change the context and meaning of what that person was saying, and who they were saying it to, and about what subject they were referring to.

The genre of reality TV is fundamentally dishonest because the producers are invisible. And so are the casting directors who look for people who they know they are going to edit into stock character types: the crying girl, the bitch, the slut, the gangster guy of color, the white

douchebag dude, the desperate single woman, etc.

More importantly, the behind the scenes manipulation once people are cast are hidden as well. The fact that people are often kept in positions that would make a psychological intelligence officer proud — that’s kept off camera.

This includes the fact that people are constantly kept sleep deprived and surveilled while also being totally cut off from the outside world. No TV, no radio, no newspapers, none of your own music on your ipod, and usually no surfing the internet. The only thing that’s supposed to be real is the surreality of whatever is going on in the house that most of these shows are

staged within. The complete sensory deprivation and constant surveillance that are intentionally used to break down people’s defenses and to change the way real people would normally act is invisible.

Beyond that, there’s the fact that producers film 100% of the time, use 1% of what they film, and then from that 1% edit down to suit whatever narrative they want us to buy into. So what that means is, whenever you are watching a reality show, you are watching less than 1% of whatever anybody said or did and whatever the circumstances were. If cameras followed either one of us around for an entire day, could a producer theoretically edit us to become anything they wanted? If you stubbed your toe and screamed “Oh fuck!” in a huge tirade because you were in physical pain, but then they took just your screaming but not the toe stubbing and juxtaposed that with you at work, could they make it look like you were acting out at work in a totally inappropriate way? Yes, they could.

That’s why in the book I offer so many quotes from producers and story editors and people who have worked on these shows who admit that their role is being puppeteers. They can take something black and make it white. They can manufacture crushes, feuds, heartbreak. When people say “Oh yeah, I know that reality TV isn’t real. There’s a little editing,” maybe they think they know that but usually in the second breath they’ll say, “That bitch needed to be voted off that show” or “Oh, that guy is such a douchebag.” If you think you know anything about anyone you’ve seen on reality TV, then you don’t know it’s fake.

R&T: Viewers still respond so much of the time the way producers and advertisers want them to.

JP: That’s another good point. These narratives are crafted specifically and extremely carefully to reinforce deep-seated ideas about race, about class, about consumption, about happiness, about sexuality, about beauty. They do this and they use familiar narratives like fairy tale im-

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agency because they know they are easy shortcuts to get us to react in any number of ways emotionally.

If anyone had any doubt that reality TV is not a realistic reflection of American life, they only have to look at reality TV from 2007 to early 2010. At the time when the housing bubble was bursting, when hundreds of thousands of people were struggling to keep their mortgages or were losing their homes, when unemployment was at the highest rate its been since the Great Depression, and when poverty was so prevalent, on "reality" TV you still had Rachel Zoe of Bravo's *The Rachel Zoe Project*, a fashion stylist, staring into the camera saying "I don't understand saving for the rainy day. Live like it's your last day every day." The show was one big product placement which implied that your life was incomplete without \$1000 name-brand designer clothes or shoes.

At the time when people were struggling to figure out how to not be homeless, you have shows being rolled out that expected us to root for massive profits for real estate speculators. We're supposed to want to watch what Bravo describes in their promo materials for *Million Dollar Listing* as "Three hot young aggressive real estate agents who will stop at nothing to close the deal." Really? That's supposed to be a good thing? We're losing our homes after predatory lenders have preyed on our communities and we're supposed to tune in to shows like *Flip That House*?

Finally, now that it's late 2010, we are starting to see one or two shows that are reflecting the fact that we are in a recession, but those shows themselves seem to be very problematic. I've been seeing previews for a show about a suburban white family that went into bankruptcy. One clip shows the father saying, "We got ourselves into this mess, now we've got to get ourselves out." They want us to think that the recession was caused by people who didn't do the right thing economically or made bad choices, and now it's up to them to work hard and pull themselves up from their boot straps to achieve the American dream once again. We all know, of course, within our activist communities that this American dream myth is a fundamentally flawed lie that enables our economic system to continue in ways that are extremely problematic for so many of us. It allows institutional injustice to remain invisible.

I wonder if on this new show, if there will be any discussion at all about the fact that it was predatory lending, that it was an intentionally over-inflated real estate market, that it was the big banks acting in fraudulent ways, that it was the Fortune 500s and insurance companies collaborating, that led to so many individual people losing everything? Are we going to learn that or is it going to be basi-

cally a reinforcement of this notion that poverty is not an institutional problem that requires institutional solutions? It's simply just dumb people being lazy or stupid and if they only smarten up and work hard, everything will get better. I think I know the answer based on the first ten years of reality TV, but we'll see.



R&T: You've heard the argument that reality television is simply giving viewers what they want. Your book does an incredible job of challenging this assertion by looking at the ways that programming is not necessarily about what viewers want but about what advertisers want. Can you talk more about debunking this myth?

JP: Thank you, thank you, thank you. Yes, it is a myth that reality TV just simply gives people what they want. For example, we have Mike Darnell at Fox saying that they are simply just "pushing the envelope to match taste" or Michael Hirschorn from VH1 and now Ish Entertainment

saying that it's women's fault that these sensationalistic programs exist because if women didn't want them, they wouldn't be made. Those statements are lies. That's a misrepresentation of the media economics that underlie this genre.

It's undeniable that many millions of people do watch many reality shows. *American Idol* was one of the most popular entertainment programs of the decade, however, most reality shows don't get *American Idol* style ratings. For every one *American Idol* or *Dancing With the Stars* big hit, there are so many reality shows with mediocre ratings or sometimes even poor ratings that get to stay on the dial, sometimes for multiple seasons, even when they get lower ratings than scripted shows. The reason that happens is because reality shows are 50-75% cheaper to produce than scripted programs and they come with a revenue stream of hundreds of thousands of dollars, sometimes millions of dollars, per season, in product placement from embedded marketers who collaborate with producers to influence which shows get greenlit in the first place. They also influence which kinds of people get cast and who are excluded, how products will be featured, and how story lines will be built around the ideology of that product or that company.

R&T: How do advertisers and marketers in reality TV achieve this?

JP: Product placement doesn't happen the way people think of it. People think it's just the big Coke cup on the table at the *American Idol* judge's desk. It's that, but it's so much more than that. As I said before, advertisers collaborate with producers to influence how these stories get told and to build shows entirely around their products. All of

the content of the program is built to be a complementary psychological environment for people to want to buy whatever it is these marketers are embedding. That becomes very problematic when it comes to women and people of color.

Consider the ideology that we've always seen in print advertising — for example, around women's bodies and who can claim beauty and who can't, and which bodies have value and which don't. We've had study after study for decades that show the more advertising women and girls see, particularly in glossy women's magazines, the more we end up having problems with our bodies and eating disordered thinking. Those advertisers don't have to cram their ideology in a static print ad or a 30 second television commercial anymore. Now they have entire series, an hour at a time for 12 - 14 episodes a season, in which to roll out their messages and their ideas. It's not just about selling us products. It's about selling us the ideas they want us to internalize that will make us feel like we need those products.

So here's an example, after *Who Wants to Marry a Multi-Millionaire*, the very first reality show that really changed the landscape was *Survivor*. There was this creation of the myth of popular demand for that show, because of massive promotion that was happening on every cross-marketing platform of the CBS, Viacom, and Infinity companies that had recently merged, and was the parent company of the network that aired *Survivor*. So everybody seemed like they were talking about it — *The Early Show*, the nightly news, morning shock jocks and news format radio shows, billboards by the side of the road — but no one was talking about it who wasn't on CBS, Viacom, and Infinity's payroll. In fact, *Survivor* was only greenlit after the product placement marketers came onboard. At first, CBS didn't want the series, but then Mark Burnett got all of these product placement sponsors to come in with hundreds of thousands of dollars, and voila, *Survivor* is on the air.

One example is the Target tent that was used on *Survivor*. Target provides a tent with a big Target logo on it as the prize in a particular challenge on *Survivor* and so then whoever wins that tent gets to live inside the tent in comfort and protected from the elements while the other contestants on the show are in the cold or the heat getting bitten by mosquitoes or tarantulas. Meanwhile, the winner is comfortable in this tent with the big Target logo on it. So in our minds, Target becomes equivalent to fulfilling the very basic needs of our survival.

We also see it in every single episode of *America's Next Top Model* where in order to be an advertiser's muse, the young women in the show have to turn themselves into a certain ad for a certain embedded sponsor, the most prominent of which is Cover Girl which is featured throughout

every season. All of the young women on an episode of *Top Model* film a commercial for Cover Girl and one after another read ad copy about why these various new makeup products from this particular makeup brand is what this girl needs and what all girls watching need to feel pretty, to

feel vibrant, to feel successful, to feel confident, to be taken seriously in the world, to get the job, to get the guy, to fall in love. They repeat it over and over and over again and it gets drilled into viewers' heads. And somehow *America's Next Top Model* is not a series-long infomercial? It's crazy because when you skip from the actual con-

tent of *America's Next Top Model* into the commercial breaks you see Cover Girl commercials. You don't see a difference between the Cover Girl commercial and what you've just seen on "the show."

This is why I call the chapter on this in the book "The World According to Cover Girl." The world according to these advertisers has always been intentionally regressive, crafted in ways that intentionally stoke insecurity, vanity, body dysmorphia, and submissive gender roles, and have glorified violence against women. Those are things we've seen for decades in print advertising and in TV commercials and now we have entire series allowing those advertisers to position their marketing messages as if they are not only not commercial but as if they are not scripted, as if they are "our real experience." How damaging is that? How damning is that? We are now being sold the idea that Madison Avenue's aspirational manipulation of us is actually our real experience. It's so false and it's so dangerous. That's one of the main reasons I wrote this book.

R&T: The final chapters of your book talk about how to be a media critic and discuss different forms of media activism. What can we do to challenge and disrupt these damaging representations and messages?

JP: The first thing I want people to understand is that I'm not telling them not to watch television. If they enjoy reality TV or any form of pop culture, I'm the last person to say "Hand over your remote." I'm saying if you want to watch these shows, learn how to become an active, engaged critical media consumer. You can still do that in ways that are fun and entertaining but you cannot engage with media in this day and age passively without subjecting yourself to propaganda and manipulation.

Media literacy is one of the key ways that we can empower ourselves and those around us to become active and healthy media consumers and citizens. The second to last chapter in the book is called "Fun With Media Literacy" because I really wanted people to understand that this is not a death sentence for fun. This isn't "take your medicine." You can play reality TV drinking games (no alcohol

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required!) and take a sip every time one of the *Real Housewives* uses a child, a dog, or a gay person as an accessory. You can take a sip whenever "ethnic" music or clothing is played in the soundtrack or placed visually when a model of color comes on the screen to distinguish between her and the "normal" white model.

There's also a "Backlash Bingo" game I include in the book. The idea is to watch out for the stereotypes and to actively look for the moments that are problematic along issues of race, gender, class, or sexuality. Look for the product placement. Don't just let it pass you by. If you are looking for these, thinking about them, talking about them, critiquing them, then they don't have the same kind of power to weasel their way into your psyche the way advertisers hope they will have. That's part of the media literacy solution to the first part of the problem, which is how do you watch media without being mentally colonized.

The second question is what can we do to transform the media landscape itself? Media literacy should not be, cannot be, a means to an intellectual end. Once we are media literate ourselves, then the question is what are we going to do to try and start demanding the kind of engaging, critical, fun, challenging, diverse, and interesting media that we deserve? If anything bothers us in the media then what are we going to do about it? That's what I asked more than a dozen media justice activists, scholars, and independent media producers to answer for the conclusion chapter of the book. I thought it was very important for me not to write that conclusion myself. I wanted people to understand that there are a vast number of strategies and options they can take to make a difference and there are so many different people and organizations that can help them do that.

Some contributors in this chapter of the book include Andrea Quijada, from the Media Literacy Project, who has a great, really succinct and specific set of strategies that parents or others can use to lobby for media literacy curriculum in K-12 schools. Julie Hollar, the editor of *Extra!* magazine at Fairness & Accuracy in Reporting, also shares how you can monitor news media for inaccuracy and bias. There are discussions on fighting media consolidation and breaking up the media monopolies. There are discussions about how to create independent media. There are so many different ways to go about it. I only had a chapter. I could write a whole book about what we can do.

R&T: Your work is a part of the organization Women In Media & News (WIMN). Can you talk about the group — what it is and how it came to be?

JP: I founded WIMN in late 2001. At the time there was no Women, Action, and Media conference. There was no Women's Media Center. There was no She Source. I had been running the Women's Desk at FAIR and when I left there, I realized that FAIR was the only game in town anywhere when it came to feminist, anti-racist news media analysis. I basically realized that if I was going to do

the work that I needed to do but also to broaden it beyond news media, I needed to create something because there was a real absence in the landscape. We just didn't have any national organizations dedicated to transforming the media for women and to increasing women's presence and power in the public debates using multiple strategies around content, production and policy.

Our work at WIMN includes doing media trainings and media literacy workshops, doing advocacy journalism, and more. At the same time we work with journalists to help them increase the diversity and the quantity of women's voices appearing in media. We are a media analysis, education, and advocacy group. Our media education involves lots of panels, lectures, and multimedia presentations. We work in coalition formally and informally to support media justice efforts at the structural and institutional levels.

We also have a website as well as our blog, WIMN's Voices, on women and the media. It ebbs and flows with how many people are posting at any given time but the goal is that every issue should be and can be reported as a women's issue, not just rape, childcare, abortion, and fashion. We have people looking at Women, Media, and Science; Women, Media, and War; or Women, Media, and Global Policy. The idea again is that our perspectives and voices matter across the board. No matter what the story is, the story cannot be an accurate reflection without women's perspectives involved.

R&T: Thank you for sharing about the work of WIMN and for all of your research, analysis, and hard work writing *Reality Bites Back*. You bring so many important social justice issues to the forefront through your critique of reality TV programming. We appreciate your courage and commitment in doing that.

To learn more about Reality Bites Back: The Troubling Truth About Guilty Pleasure TV or to order a copy, please visit <http://www.realitybitesbackbook.com>. The website also showcases several funny, eye-opening "Reality Rehab" satire videos. You can view the trailer and webisodes at <http://www.realitybitesbackbook.com/about-reality-bites-back/reality-rehab-with-dr-jenn>.

To connect with Women In Media & News or the blog WIMN's Voices, visit <http://www.wimnonline.org>.

