

## **Reality TV: Déjà Vu All Over Again?** **Kathryn Fuller-Seeley**

### Aspects of Reality Television in 1930s US Culture

I originally posted this session's call for panelists because, well, I am a historian, and I tend to think there's very little in the media that's totally new and has never been done before. On the one hand, I wanted to float an idea that the current popularity of reality television programming in the US might be part of a cyclical trend in broadcasting history. Quiz shows, contests and documentary-influenced programming were prominent at the beginning of broadcast radio in the US as the networks were just forming (in the late 1920s and early-to-mid 1930s), then were overshadowed by scripted narrative fictional programming and big-name-entertainers in the 1935-1946 period. During that time the same stars and programs dominated and their forms (and performances) became shopworn and dull. Then in 1946-1950, during network evening broadcast radio's crisis and decline, quiz shows and non-fictional programming again became "new", different and popular. After all, giveaway contest shows drove Fred Allen off the air. So maybe reality programming is more prominent at the beginnings and endings of a major programming regime. The same might be said of network television – quiz shows, games and reality programming at its US beginnings in the late 40s and 50s, then a decline as fictional shows and "real" celebrities dominate until the late 1990s, then a renewed wave of reality programming. Perhaps the Internet revolution will break this pattern (or Fred Allen will be re-incarnated on the Internet in about 2020? Haha)

On the other hand, I wanted to suggest that the current popularity of reality television programming might be connected to widespread anxieties and concerns that are very similar to those seen in the culture of the economic depression of the 1930s. Get rich quick schemes, beating out the competition for jobs and mates, ritual public humiliations, and fear of catastrophic loss (and listening to tales of others who have suffered such losses) filled the movies, radio program, songs and advertising of the 1930s. There IS, of course, a great deal that is new and different, or more concentrated and focused about today's reality TV programs than had ever been achieved in the past. And media scholars' analysis of reality TV, its producers, texts and audiences is absolutely fascinating. The work that Laurie Ouellete, James Hay, Anna McCarthy and others are doing on themes of "governmentality" and makeover shows' construction of an "ethic of self-sufficient citizenship promoted by neoliberal regimes" (Ouellete and Hay 2008) give great insights into political and ideological issues in current US culture. The sufferings of makeover participants and the public humiliation of game show contestants and American Idol hopefuls in many ways seem much more visceral on current TV than in earlier cultural forms.

Nevertheless, I wanted to throw out the example of the huge popularity of Major Bowes' Amateur Hour, which at its height 1934-1936 was the highest rated radio program in the US, with 10,000 clamoring contestants each week, huge audience input from phone calls and letters, promotional tie-ins, and Bowes' humiliating "gonging" of struggling performers (which both the theater and home audiences apparently enjoyed). Another 1930s connection is a 1974 *Jump Cut* article, "Shirley Temple and the House of

Rockefeller,” in which Charles Eckert argued that Shirley’s formulaic films performed “governmentality” functions of substituting a child’s unconditional love to soften the hard-hearted old men and providing a kind of psychic charity that would obviate any need for federal social aid in the Depression. I’ll bring information about them and other Thirties’ proto-reality-programming along to our conference.

What I especially like about analysis of today’s reality TV programming is its ability to give us insight into cultural concerns that is much harder to dig up about the past. So maybe reality TV can teach us more about how cultural anxieties of 1930s played out in its long-lost popular culture.