

gets reader's attention!
Televising Humiliation" by Adam Cohen

In November 2006, a camera crew from NBC's "Dateline" and a police SWAT team descended on the Texas home of Louis William Conradt Jr., a 56-year-old assistant district attorney. The series' "To Catch a Predator" team had allegedly caught Conradt making online advances to a decoy who pretended to be a 13-year-old boy. When the police and TV crew stormed Conradt's home, he took out a handgun and shot himself to death.

"That'll make good TV," one of the police officers on the scene reportedly told an NBC producer. Deeply cynical, perhaps, but prescient. "Dateline" aired a segment based on the grim encounter.

After telling the ghoulish tale, it ended with Conradt's sister Patricia decrying the "reckless actions of a self-appointed group acting as judge, jury and executioner, that was encouraged by an out-of-control reality show."

Patricia Conradt sued NBC for more than \$100 million. Last month, Judge Denny Chin of U.S. District Court in New York ruled that her lawsuit could go forward. Chin's thoughtful ruling sends an important message at a time when humiliation television is ubiquitous, and plumbing ever lower depths of depravity in search of ratings.

NBC's "To Catch a Predator" franchise is based on an ugly premise. The show lures people into engaging in loathsome activities. It then teams up with the police to stage a humiliating, televised arrest, while the accused still has the presumption of innocence.

Each party to the bargain compromises its professional standards. Rather than hold police accountable, "Dateline" becomes their partners - and may well prod them to more invasive and outrageous actions than they had planned. When Conradt did not show up at the "sting house" - the usual "To Catch a Predator" format - producers allegedly asked police as a "favor" to storm his home. Patricia Conradt contends that the show encourages police to give a special intensity to any arrests, so as to enhance the camera effect.

probably The police make their own corrupt bargain, ceding law enforcement to TV producers. Could Conradt have been taken alive if he had been arrested in more conventional fashion, without SWAT agents, cameras and television producers swarming his home? Chin said a jury could plausibly find that it was the television circus, in which the police acted as the ringleader, that led to his suicide.

"To Catch a Predator" is part of an ever-growing lineup of shows that calculatingly appeal to their audience's worst instincts. The common theme is indulging the

others?

audience's voyeuristic pleasure at someone else's humiliation, and the nastiness of the put-down has become the whole point of the shows.

Humiliation TV has been around for some time. "The Weakest Link" updated the conventional quiz show by installing a viciously insulting host, and putting the focus on the contestants' decision about which of their competitors is the most worthless. "The Apprentice" purported to be about young people getting a start in business, but the whole hour built up to a single moment: when Donald Trump barked "You're fired."

But to hold viewers' interest, the levels of shame have inevitably kept growing. A new Fox show, "Moment of Truth," in a coveted time slot after "American Idol," dispenses cash prizes for truthfully (based on a lie-detector test) answering intensely private questions.

Sample: "Since you've been married, have you ever had sexual relations with someone other than your husband?" If the show is as true as it says it is, questions in two recent episodes seemed carefully designed to break up contestants' marriages.

There are First Amendment concerns, of course, when courts consider suits over TV shows. But when the media act more as police than as journalists, and actually push the police into more extreme violations of rights than the police would come up with themselves, the free speech defense begins to weaken.

Patricia Conradt's lawsuit contains several legal claims, including "intentional infliction of emotional distress," for which the bar is very high: conduct "so outrageous in character, and so extreme in degree, as to go beyond all possible bounds of decency, and to be regarded as atrocious, and utterly intolerable in a civilized community."

Reprehensible as "Moment of Truth" is, it doubtless falls into the venerable category of verbal grotesquery protected by the First Amendment. The producers of "To Catch a Predator," however, appear to be on the verge - if not over it - of becoming brown shirts with television cameras. If you are going into the business of storming people's homes and humiliating them to the point of suicide, you should be sure to have some good lawyers on retainer.

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