

Addiction & the Humanities Vol.4

(3) -The Buzz: Taking a closer look at addiction in pop culture.

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Approximately one year ago, HBO launched [The Addiction Project](#) in partnership with the [Robert Wood Johnson Foundation](#), the [National Institute of Drug Abuse](#), and the [National Institute of Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism](#) (Leis, 2007). Mental health advocates lauded the film and education project as “groundbreaking” and hoped it would educate the public about addiction (Leis, 2007) and create a new dialogue about addiction. Fast forward one year and addiction is still in the headlines. Now, the very same organizations that praised The Addiction Project for its honest portrayal of addiction are upset by [“Celebrity Rehab with Dr. Drew”](#) on VH1 (Jesella, 2008). This week’s Humanities inquires whether presentations of addiction in the popular culture are potentially harmful.

HBO’s Addiction Project featured a documentary, a book, four independent addiction-themed movies, a website, and a national community grassroots campaign coordinated by [Faces and Voices of Recovery](#), [Join Together](#), and [Community Anti-Drug Coalitions of America \(CADCA\)](#). These three groups brought together elected officials, people in recovery, and community-based organizations to promote awareness and discuss new policies for addiction treatment. Many reviewers praised the series, which was honored by the Academy of Television Arts and Sciences Governors Award in 2007.

Two recent changes in the media have influenced the depiction of addiction: the public’s desire for celebrity gossip and the explosion of reality television shows. Celebrity gossip has become so popular that following Britney Spears, who has been to rehabilitation three times in the past year, has become an industry in and of itself. During the past year, millions of Americans have viewed her every move. You can see the importance of celebrity gossip in our daily lives by measuring the rapid growth of the celebrity gossip website TMZ.com. According to Alexa.com, a company that analyses web traffic, TMZ.com is one of the top 200 websites for Internet traffic in the U.S. and one of the top 1,000 websites worldwide. It has become so popular that photographs and footage shot by TMZ staff have found

their way into national news broadcasts.

The other vehicle driving this voyeuristic behavior is reality television. The popularity of reality television began with MTV's "Real World" series in 1992. The show placed seven strangers together in an apartment for several months and followed their every move (MTV, 2008). Between 1992 and 2008 there has been a multitude of reality TV shows many of which aired on MTV and VH1. A spin-off of the "Real World" on MTV was "The Surreal Life" on VH1 that used celebrity participants. Reality television was recently bolstered by the 14-week writers' strike (Mitchell & Goldmann, 2008) that left television executives without scripts. To fill open time slots, TV executives opted for a variety of new reality television shows.

Recent media depictions of substance use and unsuccessful attempts at rehabilitation have some addiction experts worried that celebrities (e.g. Lindsay Lohan and Britney Spears) are making a mockery of the rehabilitation experience and the seriousness of addiction (Reuters, 2007). The exposure of rehabilitation by Dr. Drew Pinsky, a practicing physician board-certified in addiction medicine, in the VH1 reality show "Celebrity Rehab with Dr. Drew" (Kotlyar, 2008) has fueled heated discussion. Groups such as Faces and Voices of Recovery are mobilizing against "Celebrity Rehab," arguing that the drama that plays out on the show sensationalizes addiction (Faces and Voices of Recovery, 2008) and takes advantage of vulnerable people. Can people suffering from mental disorder give truly informed consent to have their story televised? Concerned groups argue the show's depiction does not match reality. For example, most people who seek treatment do not have access to the quality of the facilities shown on "Celebrity Rehab" (Faces and Voices of Recovery, 2008). Opponents of the show "believe that when people see this show, they'll wonder why they should help people with addiction and why people should get insurance coverage for their care" (Calderone, 2008). This might make it difficult to fix inequalities in the reimbursement for addiction treatment compared with other chronic diseases.

"Celebrity Rehab" seems to be the logical marriage of the public's incessant need for up-to-the-minute gossip on celebrities (e.g. TMZ.com), the popularity of reality television, and celebrity voyeurism. Dr. Pinsky defends his show arguing that the public's focus is already on celebrities and their battles with addiction. What he is attempting to do is harness that focus and help the public understand that rehabilitation is not easy and that it takes a lot of hard work (Celizic, 2008). VH1

executives defend the show stating “Celebrity Rehab is as real as it gets... this is about as scared straight as you’re going to get” (Miller, 2008). The show spans the entire 21 days inpatient rehabilitation process. However, the time restrictions of television allow VH1 to show only approximately one percent of everything that occurred during the 21 days filmed (Kotlyar, 2008). Despite the criticism, the show has opened to favorable reviews (Maynard, 2008; Rhodes, 2008).

Celebrities and their public fight against addiction will continue to be the buzz in pop culture. Society’s desire for contact with celebrities does not seem to be waning. Reality television shows offer television audiences an opportunity for guilt-free voyeurism. Are people watching shows like “Celebrity Rehab” to understand the struggles of addiction? Maybe, but just as many are probably watching because they enjoy seeing other people, especially the rich and famous, suffer. It gives them an opportunity to compare their lives to those they see on television. Their struggle with addiction in the public eye is an opportunity to educate the public at large. Addiction advocates and treatment specialists need to constructively shape the discussion and ensure that the public is not misled, all the while making sure that those seeking treatment get the care they deserve.

What do you think? Does “Celebrity Rehab with Dr. Drew” glamorize substance use and take advantage of the mentally ill or is it a continuation of the dialogue started by the HBO’s Addiction Project, focused on a younger audience?

Comments can be addressed to John H Kleschinsky.

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