

# Scholars question reality of 'Survivor' behavior

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Throughout the summer, we sat transfixed as the Machiavelian twists and turns of television's "Survivor" played out on a tropical beach just this side of Borneo.

The last fiki torches of Survivor Island were extinguished Wednesday night. Rhode Island corporate consultant Richard Hatch took home a cool \$1 million. Wisconsin trucker Susan Hawk got hot under the collar. Everybody hugged and made up during Bryant Gumbel's post-show show.

But for those who study human behavior — and the media, its powerful prism — the story is hardly over.

On university campuses, observers of the ethics, morals and values in popular culture are just beginning to deconstruct CBS' surprise summer hit. And many of them don't like what they saw.

Their early analysis: **"Survivor" distorted and oversimplified reality.**

Everything about "Survivor" was simpler and more manageable than the mess most people's lives are in, said Barry

Brummett, professor of communication at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. He specializes in the rhetoric of popular culture.

"If we come to expect that our real-life experiences on Thursday morning will somehow work the way the reality-based TV simulation did on Wednesday night, then we're in trouble, because our lives are not simple, not predictable, not risk-free."

If people used watching "Survivor" as an occasional refuge from real life, that's OK, Brummett said. But he said many people worry that we as a society are increasingly coming to expect reality to work out the way these simulations do.

**"Survivor" promoted voyeurism.**

The "Survivor" crew of exhibitionists was carefully contrived to generate conflict and feed voyeurism, said Clay Calvert, assistant professor of communications and law at Penn State University and author of "Voyeur Nation: Media, Privacy and Peering in Modern Culture" (Westview Press, \$25).

"It's a vicarious experience," he said. "We all have these desires to back-stab and fight, and we can kind of experience that through these shows."

The fallout of "reality" TV,



Richard Hatch, winner of "Survivor," appears naked on the "Late Show with David Letterman" Wednesday night to deliver the No. 1 answer to the Top Ten Things I Learned on the Survivor Island. His answer was, "The human body is a beautiful thing." Hatch was joined on the show by the other cast members. His genital area was digitally blocked out for broadcast.

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from a decade of "America's Funniest Home Videos," MTV's "The Real World" and their ilk, is that our expectations for privacy and being watched are being changed, he said. "It pushes us not to value the privacy of others.

"That is changing out in the world, too. Cameras are tracking us in stores, at ATMs, in banks. We are getting used to having cameras around us."

**"Survivor" diminished**

**the value of teamwork.**

"It's painful to watch. It's almost like watching a train wreck," said Phylis Ravel, chairman and artistic director of Marquette University's department of performing arts. She viewed the show occasionally to keep up with what her students were watching.

"I wish they had 'Survivor' programs where everybody worked as a team, and the best team won a million dollars."

Some experts in the study of contemporary media downplayed the negative impact of "reality" shows such as "Survivor."

In other words, it was just a TV show, people.

"It's about testing our own mettle," said Stuart Fischhoff, professor of media psychology at California State University at Los Angeles.

According to Fischhoff, we feel frustrated and constrained by our technological society, our insulated, "anti-Darwin" lives. Cagey mind games and the quasi-adventure of the show's Immunity Challenges afford viewers the opportunity to put their own fantasies and abilities to the test.

"Survivor" simply was not that disturbing, said Syracuse University professor Robert J. Thompson, director of the Center for the Study of Popular Television.

"I don't think it's putting a model out there that's going to make us back-stabbing Machiavellians. ... We recognized so much of what we saw, and that's why we liked it so much."

Thompson's last word: "If I had a list of the million things threatening American life today, Rich's behavior on 'Survivor' would not be on the list."