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Predators at Large: Dateline NBC and Reality TV

In the age of digital media, entertainment is king, regardless of origin. One need not look very far to see the incredible impact digital trends have had on the media industry as a whole. While other television genres are skyrocketing, the realm of reality television outmatches nearly every other competitor. In 2013 alone, over fifty percent of primetime audiences were watching their favorite reality TV show (Webster). According to polls done at the turn of the twenty first century, over sixty-eight percent of the American population between the ages of eighteen and twenty-nine would say that they like or love to watch reality television shows on a consistent basis (Oregon). For many audience members, the draw is solely product-based, whereas the objective for a producer lies in the reality show's profits. Certain reality shows run a price margin that is nearly a third of their dramatic or comedic peers. For comparison, "*Friends*—a scripted hit with actors who get more expensive with every contract—is the old-line antithesis of *Survivor*, a moneymaking machine with disposable stars and no writers" (Oregon). Reality programming seeks to sift through and capitalize on ideas that serve both ends well, satisfying the market and the television industry. *To Catch a Predator*, an NBC *Dateline* 'reality' show based around luring and arresting potential child predators, is one such show. For many, the show is harmless fun, perhaps even doing the public a favor by exposing 'less-desirables' in communities. For others, it raises some important, irreparable issues within ethic and legal systems.

Debuting in 2004, *To Catch a Predator* stunned NBC executives with its consistent viewership and advertiser-friendly politics (Chammah). "The original broadcasts have averaged

9.2 million viewers, beating out such entertainment-division staples as *Will & Grace* (with an average of 8.6 million viewers last season) and *The Office* (7.9 million)” (Cook). More, the 18-to-49-year-old demographic episodes “are listed sixteen out of NBC's forty-one broadcast shows, beating *Scrubs* and *Fear Factor*” (Cook). This widely successful concept was not original to *Dateline* or to its host, Chris Hanson, but to a twenty-seven-year-old community college dropout by the name Phillip John Eide (Cook).

After witnessing lewd comments directed towards children at his chatroom tech job, Phillip Eide founded an organization called *Perverted Justice* under the pseudonym Xavier von Erck (Cook). *Perverted Justice* is an all-volunteer program in the pursuit of making internet chatrooms a safer place for children (Cook). Xavier would pose as a minor in a chatroom to lure men into making offers or sending indecent pictures, then post screenshots to social media to embarrass them and their family (Cook). Eventually, local news stations began to get interested in Eide’s idea, and helped the fledgling organization set up sting operations using a rented house (Cook). It did not take long for *Dateline NBC* to catch wind of the up-and-coming television spotlight, and they promptly purchased the series as their own (Cook). Interestingly enough, “*To Catch a Predator*” is not officially classified as a reality television show, raising both ethical and legal concerns.

It's produced under the auspices of NBC's vaunted news division, which has gone to unprecedented lengths to secure Von Erck's ongoing cooperation, reportedly paying him in excess of \$100,000 per episode for his services, and even giving him, according to one source, a cut of any revenue from future DVD sales of the shows. (Cook)

Because of this, Eide has met with significant opposition, most of which he has dealt with through destroying the lives of others, most noticeably found in the case of Bruce Raisley

(Cook). In short, the unethical behavior behind the production of *Predator* have led many to question its integrity.

This shady behavior came into the limelight two years later in November of 2006 with a botched warrant and a subsequent suicide. Dateline had identified fifty-six-year-old Louis Conradt Jr., a Texas District Attorney who had responded to one of their decoys (Rodgers and Stone). Because he did not come to the sting house to meet the ‘minor,’ Dateline camera crews and law enforcement forced their way into Conradt’s home (Rodgers and Stone). The attorney met them in his hallway with a semiautomatic weapon pointed at his head (Rodgers and Stone). Before police could intervene, Conradt shouted “I’m not going to hurt anybody” before firing a round into his head (Rodgers and Stone). He was pronounced dead at the scene (Rodgers and Stone).

The aftermath was nothing short of chaotic. The unnamed case *NBC Universal vs. Conradt* was filed on June 3rd by Louis Conradt’s sister, Patricia. Suing the studio for personal reasons, Patricia Conradt cited “emotional distress and civil rights violations” as her main issue with the show (Baker). Very little is known about the case, as it was settled out of court in 2007, ending the conflict with \$109 million paid to Conradt’s sister (Chammah). Both parties declined to comment on the specifics of their agreement, but the case had made enough impact to make advertisers more than a little nervous, dropping the value of *Predator* to Dateline (Chammah). The last episode of *Predator* aired in late 2007, and Chris Hansen was let go from NBC soon afterwards in 2013 (Chammeh).

To Catch a Predator has many legal issues scattered throughout. During the sting against Conradt, Dateline reporters, cameras, and personnel may have staked out Conradt’s house for many hours before an official police warrant was signed (Baker). In fact, “a later investigation

into the Murphy episodes shows that local police were simply attempting to “put Murphy on the map,” and possibly gain personal fame for themselves” (Baker 41). Even beyond this, “Perverted Justice members refused to testify and turn over records,” causing many to believe that the show was nothing more than entrapment for the stupid (Rodgers and Stone). Further, it became an issue for Dateline to use online evidence and a “sting house” across multiple different counties, causing a jurisdictional dispute (Rodgers and Stone). To cap it all off, Dateline’s methods were not enough to secure any kind of legal prosecution (Rodgers and Stone). Indeed, “none of the 23 men who were arrested in the Murphy sting [Conradt included] were properly Mirandized, leading to zero convictions in any of the subsequent cases. . . Fewer than 50% of all of the men exposed on “To Catch a Predator” were ever convicted of any crime” (Baker 42). Upon a closer look, the actions of *To Catch a Predator* are vituperative indeed.

On an ethical level, *To Catch a Predator* exists in a grey area in many ways. Some people praise the show, stating that any excuse to discover, oust, and punish societal deviants is more than justified (Rodgers and Stone). Others praise the public humiliation as simply a facet of good television, claiming that men who would prey on children are hardly human at all (Cook). Yet, the men portrayed on *Predator* are very rarely confirmed sex offenders, and even less so violent persons (Baker). In fact, one of the many individuals to appear on the show was a man with severe cerebral palsy (Baker). In the midst of opinions and personal dogmas, many unbiased critics use the Society of Professional Journalists Code of Ethics to make decisions regarding what one should or should not do in media or in another reporting medium (Rodgers and Stone). Among the myriad of guidelines listed, several are directly applicable to the contents of *To Catch a Predator* specifically.

First on this list would be in going ‘undercover’ or using any sort of deception in order to gain information (Rodgers and Stone). Not only does this place a semipermeable layer of doubt on a subject, but it may also undermine a reporter’s credibility. While the use of such methods could be easily explained as a facet of the storytelling used by *Predator*, taking advantage of someone else for personal gain is not in accordance with the Golden Rule: “So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets” (ESV). *Predator* also violates the rule of avoiding organizations or activities that could compromise their journalistic integrity (Rodgers and Stone). Perverted Justice has used more than a few unethical practices to remove those who disagree with them, cited in the case of Bruce Raisley (Cook). Perverted Justice was paid handsome amounts of money to secure the future profit for the show (Cook).

Predator violates still more of SPJ’s ethical code with their practice of naming suspects before they are charged with crimes, and disallowing these ‘suspects’ from defending themselves (Rodgers and Stone). When ‘predators’ are filmed approaching the sting house, they are outed as criminals by show host Chris Hanson, who reads censored chat logs regarding the purported ‘intent’ of the men. The minors described with the words ‘innocent’ and ‘pure,’ which further pushes the narrative of corruption or criminal behavior of individuals not yet even arrested for a crime (Baker 22). Despite high ratings and millions of viewers, these citations and others leave little mystery as to why *To Catch a Predator* left the air.

Preventing legal or ethical violations of this kind in the future will be no easy task. Indeed, media is a business first, and will do whatever it takes to find more sensationalism, reach more viewers, and make more money. However, the means by which a media business is run can be the means by which it is governed: through the people. If a show is not well-received by the

audience demographic, it will not be continuously run. When *Predator*'s underlying legal and ethical issues were revealed to the general population, the show was removed from broadcast completely, now running solely on syndicated channels. As people become aware of a show's unscrupulous methods, it will be in their power to have that show removed, should enough of them band together.

In conclusion, the actions taken by Dateline NBC and the organization Perverted Justice are not only borderline illegal, but grossly unethical as well. Ignoring local and federal law, Dateline has consistently found ways to meet their own needs, even resulting in the death of a high-profile politician. Using the sensationalism of sex, the studio has brought it upon themselves to use unethical tactics on the internet to 'entice' men to appear at a sting houses to meet a squad of police officers and a host of cameras. Collaborating with the citizen justice group Perverted Justice, Dateline has undermined its own credibility, as well as 'bid' money for covering a subject that they know will make them even more money (Cook). Finally, *Predator* has resulted in few arrests and even fewer convictions, due to their sloppy and ill-approached investigations. With the knowledge given to the public through numerous receipts, records, and eyewitness reports, it is my hope that audience members can become active participants of what they watch, opting instead for a voice in the media as opposed to dispassionate viewership. It is up to the people to decide, in the case of Dateline NBC, who truly is the predator, and who truly is the prey.

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