

Herald Sun

19.08.2015



TV's guilty pleasures

Why cats, weird body parts and strange addictions are big business for the networks



TURN IT UP
THE SMALL SPEAKERS
MAKING A BIG NOISE

ROB SITCH
'WE STOLE A CAMERA TO
MAKE OUR FIRST SKETCH'

COVER STORY



LIKE US.
FACEBOOK.COM/
SWITCHEDONAUSTRALIA



ON THE IPAD.
BE THE FIRST TO READ
SWITCHED ON VIA OUR APP

Why 'trash TV' rules



MY BIG FAT GYPSY WEDDING

Monster ratings for funny cats has highlighted a TV genre we pretend not to love, writes **Andrew Fenton**

The ridicule came thick and fast when Seven announced it was scheduling *Cats Make You Laugh Out Loud* in a gap opened up by ratings flop *Restaurant Revolution*.

"Cats? Really?" sniffed News.com.au. "Catastrophe" punned Pedestrian. Fairfax argued the deployment of "feline funsters" meant Seven was "waving the white flag".

The smirks quickly disappeared when the cats cleaned up in the ratings with more than 1.5 million viewers nationwide (917,000 across the five major capitals).

Rival program makers despaired: one insider told Switched On they couldn't believe their months of hard

work on a show they're proud of was beaten by "a show about cats doing a dump in a toilet with a laugh track underneath".

"Am I asleep?" tweeted Grant Denyer, host of rival, *The Great Australian Spelling Bee*. "Did marriage equality just get blocked AND cat videos nearly got 1 million viewers last night? F--- it, I give up!"

Companion show *Dogs That Make You LOL* was due to screen last night, after Switched On went to press.

"People take this stuff way too seriously," says Seven's director of programming Angus Ross, sounding utterly delighted. "(Viewers) want entertainment, they want a laugh and if it's laughing at

something stupid, what's actually wrong with that?"

But the ratings figures should not have come as a shock because reality style guilty pleasures — from YouTube compilations to secret addictions and big fat gypsy weddings — have become one of the most popular, if most maligned, genres on television.

Distinct from the glitzy and expensive reality competitions that networks build their brands around, including *My Kitchen Rules*, *The Block* and *MasterChef*, the genre is cheap and cheerful, filming real life for entertainment rather than information.

While fans of so-called "trash TV" are often ridiculed, it's the go-to entertainment choice for plenty of highly intelligent people. You can dip in and out of these shows without commitment — unlike reality competitions that demand hours of attention four nights a

week, or binge-worthy dramas that require a spreadsheet and a calculator to keep tabs on the plot developments.

Even British PM David Cameron is a fan, revealing recently that he unwinds at the end of each day with 30 minutes of "trash TV" before falling asleep on the couch.

Emma Ashton from the website Reality Ravings — whose background is in politics — says the appeal is simple. "People have busy, stressful lives and a short, sharp show can help you unwind and disengage your brain," she says.

Some of these programs find entertainment in weird subcultures or strange characters (think *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* or *Duck Dynasty*). Others draw in viewers with grotesque medical problems (*Embarassing Bodies*), strange psychological issues (*Hoarders*) or people behaving badly (*Sun, Sex and*

GUILTY PLEASURE FOR GOOD

Embarassing Bodies Down Under host Dr Brad McKay says some of his colleagues look down on his program, assuming it makes fun of patients. He sets them straight.

"We are using this as a bit of a guilty pleasure," he says. "People are watching it because they've been told all their lives that tits and bums are rude —



and you're meant to be giggling at different, gross body bits. But after we've got their attention, we say: 'Well this is what you need to do if you've got this problem.'

"(The show is) good for you at the same time as being a little bit cheeky, a little bit naughty. "People are getting over major medical problems that have been setting them back, in some cases, for over a decade."

Suspicious Parents). Like "clickbait" on websites, guilty pleasures often live or die based on their titles. Without big name stars, major prizes or big budgets all they have to spruik is the subject matter — usually in the most lurid and enticing way possible.

"Increasingly, where people are just flicking through EPGs looking for shows to watch, the importance of titles can't be underestimated," Ross says.

"*Cats That Make you LOL* is pretty simple, so is *The Man With The Biggest Testicles*.

"What's on the tin is what's inside."

Ross Crowley, Foxtel's director of content, strategy and programming, agrees.

"When you get something like *Posh Orgies* or *When Ghosts Attack* you know it's not Shakespeare," he says. "Anything that would have previously made a *National Enquirer* or *Star Magazine* cover makes good TV. Unusual things, accidents, anything out of the ordinary or where you get a deeply personal look at a subculture. Whole channels have built themselves around it."

Including Foxtel, of course. Many of the subscription TV service's channels specialise in particular genres of guilty pleasures — what Crowley calls "Pop TV".

A&E skews towards men (*Swamp People*, *Pawn Stars*), Lifestyle You aims for women (*Say Yes To The Dress*, *Dance Moms*), MTV looks to younger viewers (*Catfish*), while Arena offers up more aspirational shows (*Real Housewives*, *Million Dollar Listing*).

On free to air, the digital stations are the genre's natural

home. While Seven's main channel will run entertaining documentaries such as *Border Security* and *What Really Happens in Bali*, 7mate specialises in big character shows aimed at blokes (*Hillbilly Handfishin'*, *Outback Truckers*).

But can reality shows aimed at blokes really be called "guilty" pleasures?

"I'd suggest there are a lot of things men watch that fit in the category, just they don't feel guilty about it!" Crowley says.

Despite — or perhaps because — of its popularity, many claim to hate the genre, taking to Twitter to denounce various shows week after week.

"It comes back to it being a guilty pleasure, a secret

"When you get ... Posh Orgies or When Ghosts Attack you know it's not Shakespeare"

ROSS CROWLEY ON REALITY SHOW TITLES

indulgence, and I think people say they don't like it because they want to be aligned with a perceived popular voice," Nathan Cook from Maxus says.

For his part, Ross promises *Cats That Make You LOL* won't become a staple of the schedule.

"We're about trying to build brands like *My Kitchen Rules*, *House Rules* and *X Factor*, shows that perform and that our sales team can sell.

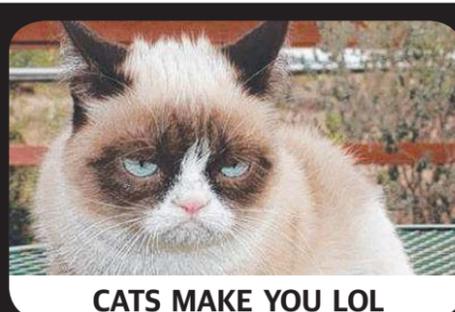
"The future of TV isn't stripped cat shows. Everyone's jobs would become a lot easier if that was the case but it's (not)."



SAY YES TO THE DRESS



DUCK DYNASTY



CATS MAKE YOU LOL



DANCE MOMS