From Networks to Netflix

A Guide to Changing Channels

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Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
NEW YORK AND LONDON

First published 2018
by Routledge
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

and by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Names: Johnson, Derek, 1979– editor.
Title: From networks to Netflix : a guide to changing channels / [edited by] Derek Johnson.
Description: New York : Routledge, 2018. | Includes bibliographical references.
Identifiers: LCCN 2017038503 | ISBN 9781138998490 (hardback) | ISBN 9781138998513 (pbk.) | ISBN 9781315658643 (ebk.)
Subjects: LCSH: Television viewers—Effect of technological innovations on. | Television broadcasting—Technological innovations—United States. | Streaming technology (Telecommunications)
Classification: LCC HE8700.66.U6 F76 2018 | DDC 302.23/45—dc23
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2017038503

ISBN: 978-1-138-99849-0 (hbk)
ISBN: 978-1-138-99851-3 (pbk)
ISBN: 978-1-315-65864-3 (ebk)

Typeset in Warnock Pro
by Apex CoVantage, LLC

TLC

Food, Fatness, and Spectacular Relatability

Melissa Zimdars

In an episode of TLC's *Freaky Eating* (2010–2011) entitled "Addicted to Cheesy Potatoes," a woman eats only potatoes slathered in cheese for all of her meals—and has since childhood—resulting in her consuming almost 3,000 pounds of potatoes each year and being medically categorized as obese. "It's definitely more than food, it's like crack to me," she says. Her uncontrollable eating of potatoes inspires feelings of shame and causes her to eat her "ooey gooey" food in secret, paralleling the reported behavior of those addicted to drugs like cocaine or heroin. Kelly is not alone in her experience, as each episode of *Freaky Eating* follows a different, self-described "Junk-Food Addict" with the same problem: a compulsion to eat specific foods, whether pizza, cheeseburgers, maple syrup, or corn starch.

Freaky Eating exists as part of a larger trend in food television programming, which has grown from the Food Network's 1993 debut, plus a smattering of instructional cooking shows on PBS, to dozens of programs across NBC, CBS, FOX, SyFy, Bravo, IFC, OWN, Travel Channel, Lifetime, WE, Discover, Cooking Channel, and of course, TLC. The proliferation of food television can be partially explained by the fact that it is inexpensive to produce, ripe for product placement, and supported by a $12 billion food advertising market (Weprin 2010). Food has also taken on greater importance culturally and socially (though this may be partly thanks to television), whether we are foodies, aspiring amateur chefs, or just everyday eaters. Beyond thinking about what we eat in a given day, many of us express concern about the dominance of highly processed foods and our contemporary foodways, or how our food cultures, traditions, and histories contribute to our current obesogenic environment.

Food television on TLC alone reflects these different foci with programming taking a variety of forms, from instructional programming like *Inedible to Incredible* (2010); cooking competitions like *Ultimate Cake Off* (2009) or *Next Great Baker* (2010–); explorations of meals, chefs, and restaurants through series like *Man vs. Food* (2008–),

Little Chocolatiers (2009–2010), or *DC Cupcakes* (2010–); stories about food consumption and food addiction like *Freaky Eating*, and series merging explorations of food and fatness, including *One Big Happy Family* (2009–2010), *My 600 Pound Life* (2012–), and *My Big Fat Fabulous Life* (2015–). TLC's large quantity and diversity of food programming position the channel as a major player in food television and "strengthen TLC's middle finger to the Food Network" (Hahnefeld 2010).

Furthermore, TLC is unique in the way it tells stories about food and fatness in the context of the obesity epidemic. Like most TLC programming, whether about weddings, polygamy, or little people, series at the thematic intersections of food and fatness work to combine the spectacular into the everyday. The relatable enjoyment of eating combines with the addictive or problematic potentials of our highly processed food environment, and the focus on embodiment plays off the difficulties of navigating the world in large body. TLC's combination of ordinary stories of the spectacular, and spectacular stories of the ordinary, also resist some of the worst elements of other fat television programs—the weigh-ins, extreme close-ups, and dramatic change for "maximum emotional effect" (Palmer 2014, 299). By focusing on lived experiences, personal stories, and everyday life, rather than on shrinking body parts or on the "shameful" food put into bodies, TLC instead explores the complexities and banalities of food and fatness.

However, this kind of programming strategy—combining the spectacular and the relatable—is actually less unique and far from new. Raymond Loewy, an industrial designer working in the early 1900s, argued that the key for making all kinds of "things" appealing to people is to take something surprising and make it familiar, or take something familiar and make it surprising (Thompson 2017). For example, lots of people use coupons when they grocery shop, but how many *extreme coupon* their bills down to zero or a negative amount like on *Extreme Couponing* (2010–)? Most Americans are categorized as overweight or obese, and may overeat when tempted by their favorite foods or choose a drive-thru for dinner after a long day, but how many know what it's like to weigh 600 pounds and struggle with food addiction or physical impairment like on *My 600 Pound Life*? This combination of familiarizing the spectacular, or spectacularizing the familiar, is thus a reliable throwback to our earliest understandings of consumer preferences. Yet what is significant about considering this strategy, and understanding it in relation to TLC, is how its deployment to develop relatable content for audiences in this specific industrial context works to support—and maybe even bring about—alternative and more compassionate discourses connecting food and fatness.

TLC AS EVERYDAY TV

Owned by Discovery Communications, TLC reaches an estimated 307 million international subscribers across 29 television markets throughout Europe, Asia, and Latin America, and boasts about 95 million subscribers just in the US. TLC ranks in the top 10 of US cable networks for women (Discovery 2015), and its series *My Big Fat Fabulous Life* frequently ranks as the most watched program during its Tuesday night time slot among 18- to 49-year-old women. Like most broadcast networks and cable channels,

TLC has employed different programming styles and taglines since its 1980 launch, from "A Place for Learning Minds" (1980–1998), which was used when TLC was still an acronym for The Learning Channel, to its shift toward lifestyle content under the more vague banners of "Life Unscripted" (1998–2006), "Live and Learn" (2006–2008) and "Life Surprises" (2008–). Currently, the channel uses "Everyone Needs a Little TLC" (2014–), embracing the colloquial phrase "Tender Loving Care." Each tweak in strategy necessarily corresponds with shifts in content, with TLC moving from educational series about dinosaurs, such as *Paleoworld* (1994–1997), into home makeover programs such as *Trading Spaces* (2000–2008), and then other documentary-style shows featuring personally extraordinary yet socially common life events, including *A Wedding Story* (1996–2005) and *A Baby Story* (1998–2011). According to channel President Eileen O'Neill, TLC's current strategy is to tell relatable stories about people because "there's nothing more fascinating than real life" (Levin 2010). In fact, most TLC press releases and executive quotes in industry trade publications echo the same message: TLC is the home of programming "everybody can relate to," where programming emphasizes "universal themes" (Hendrickson 2010). TLC explores these universal themes according to its "brand promise," which is to tell stories from an "inclusive, non-judgmental perspective" while being "the best destination to find the extraordinary in the everyday" (Discovery 2014).

Despite channel executives framing their programming as relatable and non-judgmental, TLC has a reputation among TV critics for exhibiting the sensational and "serving up a steady diet of junk food" (Lowry 2012) through series focusing on pregnant women in prison, families with 19 children, gypsy weddings, funerals, and extreme coupon users. These external assessments suggest a tension between what producers say they are doing and what TLC series actually convey to some audiences. For example, a producer for *Toddlers and Tiaras* (2009–) says the show merely "documents what's happening in the field," but Kristen Pike (2014) argues the show instead creates a problematic and retrograde reality. In a review of *My Big Fat American Gypsy Wedding* (2010–2015), critic Neil Genzlinger (2012) writes, "[TLC] is hardly a place to turn to for serious enlightenment. It's a place to turn to for sideshows." One short-lived TLC show, *Best Funeral Ever* (2012), is even described as running reality TV "into the ground" due to TLC hitting "new depths" with its programming decisions (Kenneally 2012). To others, shows like TLC's *Hoarding: Buried Alive* (2010–2014) are just "TV Spectacles" (Abrams 2012), where participants in TLC's programming are only "being made to look like freaks" (Owens 2015).

Yet even these spectacular tales serve important social functions when grounded in the ordinary and everyday. For example, many of the stylistic choices and manufactured narrative elements in TLC's *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* (2012–2014) frame the family as a "redneck" spectacle, but the Thompsons remain, in many ways, a typical and rarely represented working class family (Zimdars and Hawley 2012). According to communication scholar Shaheed Nick Mohammed (2015), TLC's *All-American Muslim* represents the everyday lives of American Muslims and resists discourses of difference and othering. Additional academic analyses of TLC programming find that shows like *Sister Wives* (2010–2016) queer heterosexuality (Bailey 2015) and challenge traditional

family constructs (Jorgenson 2014), while shows like *Police Women of Broward County* (2009–2011) negotiate gendered stereotypes (Cox 2012). My own analysis of TLC's *Big Sexy* (2013) identifies a productive, body positive space for the copresence of obesity epidemic and fat acceptance discourses (Zimdars 2015). According to Grace Wang, reality TV has a general tendency to "package difference into comfortingly stock characters and stereotypes" (2010, 405), yet TLC programs about food and fatness highlight differences to make them relatable, complicating and negotiating stereotypes of fat individuals through discussions of food. By combining spectacular tales with depictions of the relatable, and suggesting unique individuals and families are "just like us," TLC produces content "everyone can relate to" while playing with the very notion of "ordinary" and creating space for alternative discourses of food and fatness.

FOOD & FATNESS

TLC began positioning itself as a "destination for food lovers" (Levine 2009) by adding "food" as one of their "tent pole genres" (Schneider 2010a) alongside stories about families, such as *Little People, Big World* (2006–2015), and weddings, such as *Say Yes to the Dress* (2007–). TLC President O'Neill contends that food programs fit the desires of TLC's core audience because of their relatability, with the general logic being that "nothing brings people together better than food" (Malone 2016). The success of TLC's *Cake Boss* (2009–2015), which averaged almost 2 million viewers per week at its peak (Levine 2010), led to spin-offs like *Ultimate Cake Off* (2009) and additional series including *Little Chocolatiers* (2009–2010), *BBQ Pitmasters* (2009), *Food Buddha* (2010), *Mega Bites* (2010), *Best Food Ever* (2010–), and *Craving Comfort* (2010).

Many of the programs occupying these "tent pole genres" of food, families, and weddings coalesce around particular channel themes, especially fatness, which create connective strands between programming in ways that TLC's typically vague taglines do not make explicit. In addition to *Freaky Eating*, TLC aired *Honey, We're Killing the Kids* (2006), *I Eat 33,000 Calories a Day* (2007), *650 Pound Virgin* (2009), *Say Yes to the Dress: Big Bliss* (2012), *Big Brooklyn Style* (2012), *Curvy Brides* (2014), *Obese and Expecting* (2012), and *Fat Chance* (2016), among other specials and short series, all of which featured fat individuals. The industrial lore seems to be that television's increased interest in fatness actually goes "hand-in-hand" with the trend in food television (Schneider 2010b), premised on the idea that fatness results from overeating (Warner 2009). As Michael Schneider notes for *Variety*, "As American waistlines continue to grow, so does reality TV's fascination with fat. Showcasing more realistically sized people on reality TV would seem to be a no-brainer" (Schneider 2009). Following TLC's channel logics, series that combine stories of food consumption and experiences of fatness are imagined as possessing relatability. One TV reviewer for *Variety* explains, "So many Americans are wrestling with their weight that it's easy to identify with . . . struggles when it comes to eating better and exercising more" (Lowry 2009). In fact, two thirds of people in the US are considered to be overweight or obese, according to the problematic yet widely used Body Mass Index, reinforcing the idea that fat is nearly as relatable as food.

SPECTACULARLY RELATABLE

Much of the weight-loss programming across the television landscape, particularly *The Biggest Loser*, mocks fat individuals as "symbols of indulgence" (Palmer 2014, 303), or represents them as "raw and untutored in their food choices and therefore in need of sustainable training, adjustment, and realignment" (300). These weight-loss programs thus reinforce dominant discourses of the obesity epidemic by positioning fatness as shameful and undesirable (Zimdars 2015). In contrast, TLC Vice President for Development Rita Mullins explains TLC's different and televisually unique approach to representing fatness:

> You can't ignore how successful *The Biggest Loser* has been. But more important than that, society is looking at the issue in a different way now. The kind of programming we're doing on cable reflects that. We're putting a human face to what had been, before, a punch line. When you watch a show like *650 Pound Virgin* or *Ruby*, suddenly you realize, "I can identify with this person."
>
> (Schneider 2009)

By balancing the spectacular and the ordinary, TLC programs about fatness and food instead represent people as knowing they have problematic relationships with food and thus wanting help, whether from medical experts or from family members, to alter those relationships. Rather than "lifestyle television simplifying obesity for effect" (Palmer 2014, 302), many TLC programs present fuller, more complex, and often compassionate understandings of how fatness is differently experienced, and how individuals manage or fail to manage their relationships with food, creating a televisual alternative to typical weight-loss series. Furthermore, the programs operating at this thematic food/fat intersection deliver upon TLC's relatable yet extraordinary non-judgmental "brand promise."

For example, *One Big Happy Family* follows Tameka and Norris Cole of North Carolina, and their kids Amber and Shane, who each weigh around 350 pounds. Viewers join the family as they indulge in a dinner of their favorite comfort foods, including lasagna and fried chicken wings, while discussing the need to change their eating and exercise habits, as Shane risks developing diabetes. Most of the first episode details what the Coles family eats, showing Norris putting butter inside of his pancake batter and the family enjoying funnel cakes, slushies, and cheesecake to console themselves after being on display at a waterpark. The pilot episode elicited several accusations that TLC had exploited the Coles and made light of their body sizes (France 2010), arguing that food buffets and their large, swimsuited bodies worked to create a visual spectacle. Yet the episode also works to make the family relatable to viewers. Tameka explains, "Food for me is comfort. It makes us feel good. Eating keeps our family close. I'm willing to go to the ends of the world to make them happy."

The remainder of the series primarily focuses on the positive steps the family takes to avoid "junk foods" and lose weight, including ridding the house of processed foods and exercising together as a family. At first, the family complains about eating plain, broiled,

skinless chicken breasts, but they eventually learn how to make enjoyable and flavorful healthy meals. Each episode features ups and downs in their weight-loss journeys, but there are no dramatic setbacks, starvation diets, or marathon exercising sessions. And the secondary focus is somehow more banal: the Coles's daily lives. The show follows Amber as she joins the high school's color guard, Tameka as she goes to work, Norris picking out a re-engagement ring for his wife, and casual activities like shopping for clothes, making friends, and going on a family camping trip. Steadily, the spectacular elements of the series give way to these more mundane aspects of everyday life. Nancy Daniels, a senior vice president of production and development for TLC, tells CNN: "What appealed to us about the Coles is that they are a very real and relatable family going through a very real and relatable issues that many American families face" (France 2010). The series concludes with each of the Coles losing a moderate amount of weight; they weigh themselves in the family kitchen, avoiding the tearful, public weigh-ins of *The Biggest Loser* (2003–) and *Extreme Weight-Loss* (2011–) while allowing for a different kind of television narrative about fatness and food to unfold.

My 600 Pound Life also balances the spectacular with the ordinary. Through hour-long episodes, *My 600 Pound Life* follows individuals for a year as they qualify for, undergo, and recover from weight-loss surgery. While televised depictions of surgery may indeed be spectacular, weight-loss surgery itself is far more commonplace, with hundreds of thousands of people undergoing bariatric procedures every year (American Society for Metabolic and Bariatric Surgery 2016). Each episode begins by visually depicting participants as they struggle to shower or bathe, or as being confined to beds and recliners. Simultaneously, each participant explains difficulties in their daily lives, why and how they believe they gained weight, and their problematic relationships with food. One participant, Milla, explains, "Food equals love, food equals appreciation. Food is everything to me. It's the last thing I think about before bed and the first thing I think about when I get up in the morning" (Season 4, Episode 10). Another participant, Lupe, elaborates, "Food is my comfort. I'm an emotional eater. When I eat food, I feel happy. Food is how we celebrate, how we have a good time. It's happiness, but it's also killing me. I just have to eat something that tastes good because my legs are so swollen" (Season 4, Episode 12). Although extreme, these stories echo everyday experiences of yo-yo dieting and tales of emotional or stressful eating (Björntorp 2001). Like *One Big Happy Family*, the beginning of each episode includes numerous close-ups of the fat body and scenes where participants eat large amounts of unhealthy foods. Yet as each episode progresses, the spectacular images and behaviors again give way to far more mundane depictions. Participants are shown grocery shopping, watching television, arguing with their loved ones, or making food with their families. Often times these everyday activities appear difficult because of each participant's large size; however, these activities humanize and make subjects relatable in their focus on everyday lives rather than just the bodies they inhabit.

Spectacular imagery does come back into play as each participant undergoes bariatric surgery. Cameras capture footage from inside each participant's body and zoom in on removed parts of the stomach on the operating table. Yet like *One Big Happy Family*, each episode concludes in rather unexciting ways. Participants lose varying amounts of

weight, but there are, again, no sensational final weigh-ins or lavish monetary prizes. Instead, we see participants getting in and out of cars with greater ease, having a picnic in the park, or going to a restaurant for the first time in years. Despite "extraordinary" tales of weight gain and the spectacular images of weight-loss surgery, participants are represented as having relatively ordinary, if not boring, lives.

Finally, *My Big Fat Fabulous Life* features Whitney Way Thore, a dancer who became famous through her viral "Fat Girl Dancing" videos on YouTube. The series follows her as she struggles with polycystic ovarian syndrome, which caused her to gain almost 200 pounds in college. Like *One Big Happy Family* and *My 600 Pound Life*, early episodes of the series focuses on the physical difficulties of being fat (her mother helps her apply baby powder to her chafed legs, for example) as well as complicated relationships with food (Thore indulges in a large pizza with her friend, Buddy, and laments, "A life without pasta is not a life I want to lead"). As the series progresses, however, Thore discusses her preference for being fat, fit, and healthy—through her No Body Shame Campaign—given the realities of her underlying medical condition, which make it incredibly difficult for her to lose weight, and the realities of weight-loss in general, which pose challenges for a majority of people in the imagined audience.

Throughout each episode, Thore discusses the obstacles she experiences because of her weight, such as finding clothes to wear or finding a partner who is not attracted to her solely because she is BBW (a big beautiful woman); but episodes primarily revolve around her everyday life: moving into a new home, getting a new job, teaching her Big Girl dance classes, exercising with her trainer, and online dating. While the story of Thore dealing with elevated blood sugar levels and that situation's impact on her food consumption remains a theme throughout season two, like the medical issues detailed in other TLC series, it becomes a backdrop for the sharing of otherwise relatable life moments.

Across all of these show examples, viewers may see people who likely do not look or act quite like them, but yet the everyday experiences of individuals on screen can resonate nonetheless. This combining of the relatable and the spectacular generates viewer interest and encourages different kinds of identification, namely that fat individuals on screen need to be understood beyond what numbers appear on a scale. Further, these alternative narratives provide greater support to compassionate and complex ways of thinking about food and fatness in comparison to the stereotyping and shaming representations found across so many series looking at *either* fatness *or* the role of food, fast food, and food industries.

CONCLUSION

None of these programs culminates in a big reveal of an "after body," and generally feature minimal "success" in terms of achieving normative body sizes, which mirrors the lack of sustained, "real world" success that most people experience. Like TLC, food and bodies straddle the ordinary and the spectacular: we eat to fuel our bodies, but we also associate food with celebration and comfort. Our bodies have numerous mundane processes, but they can also do extraordinary things and be sources of both scorn and

pleasure. Of course not all TLC programming can successfully defend against accusations of exploitation or its embrace of the "freaky," nor should we accept TLC's own discourses of "relatability" and "non-judgmental" brand values as automatically true. However, through this programming strategy and thematic intersection, TLC creates a discursive space for alternative, compassionate, and sometimes light-hearted explorations of situations otherwise framed as a dire in the context of obesity epidemic.

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