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Stop watching “Hoarders”: Our lurid reality TV obsession with mental illness has crossed a line

The reality show is back, in its "most extreme ever" 8th season, once again exploiting the people it claims to help

RACHEL KRAMER BUSSEL (HTTP://WWW.SALON.COM/WRITER/RACHEL_KRAMER_BUSSEL/)

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(<http://media.salon.com/2016/01/hoarders.jpg>)

(Credit: A&E)

For a long time, I actively avoided watching “Hoarders.” I am one, so I didn’t think I needed to see others engaging in my own vice. Plus, at the height of my hoarding, I had a feeling that I would approach the show only as a way to make myself feel like my hoarding wasn’t that bad compared to what I saw on my screen, even though I couldn’t even get through my apartment door without shoving it mightily to push some of the belongings littering my floor out of the way.

Now that my hoarding tendencies are far more under control, thanks in part to living with a partner who calls me on it when my stuff starts to spill out everywhere, I’ve let my curiosity take over. I wanted to find out: Is “Hoarders” actually helping the people it showcases, or is it simply reveling in their mental illness in order to court viewers?

I’m sad to report that in the first four episodes of Season 8 that I’ve viewed, the current season A&E is promoting as “more extreme than ever

(<https://www.facebook.com/Hoarders/videos/10153763923667521/>),” I can only conclude that “Hoarders” is exploiting the hoarders it presents. I can’t deny that the people they’ve chosen do have genuine, and often extreme, problems with hoarding; for most, their homes are clearly hazards to their health and safety. Many have been threatened with eviction, or family members have expressed concern over whether their children should be removed from their

custody due to their surroundings. But what A&E has chosen to do is dramatize the outward manifestation of hoarding rather than truly getting to the root of the hoarding for either viewers or the hoarders themselves.

While the experts brought onto the show may actually be helping the individual hoarders whose messy homes are shown in all their gory, overloaded detail, what message is A&E sending about these people? In my view, it's a simple one: Look at how crazy they are! Why can't they see how ridiculous they're acting, how the mess is overflowing, that the clothes they're keeping have stains? What's wrong with them? But a better question might be: What's wrong with us for gobbling up their misfortune?

The hoarders in Season 8 seem to fall into two categories: stubborn-as-a-mule types who insist on keeping things like 40-year-old newspapers, or the "good" kind of hoarder who's open to letting 1-800-JUNK into their home to cart away their stuff. Clearly, there's only one correct answer these people can give, and their genuine hurt and fear at their stuff being taken away, which may give them a sense of safety or connection to a loved one, is treated as an inconvenience they need to get over in order to live in clean surroundings.

To me the real question then becomes: Is "Hoarders" truly giving hoarders skills and tools to stop hoarding once the cameras are turned off? Or are they simply grateful that these people have gone so far with their hoarding that they can offer YouTube clips with bonus scenes (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-B6Fke6ZXBM&list=PL9275F4B35BF95D09&index=2>) with titles like "Barbara's Jaw-Dropping Basement Assessment." These are questions we need to ask before tuning in if we are going to approach the show and the issue of hoarding from an empathetic perspective.

Here's how one Reddit user described a "Hoarders" taping (https://www.reddit.com/r/AskReddit/comments/1pcl0l/have_any_of_you_ever_been_on_a_reality) they participated in showcasing their dad's hoarding: "[A]t the end of the day, the producers want a good story to be told, so they are needling away at you for emotional reactions and drama. There is this weird friction between the host and clean-up crew, who seem to genuinely want to help the situation get better; and the producers who want you to dwell on emotional stuff and explore conflict for the camera." While the Reddit poster reported that there was some improvement following the taping, along with the help of several months of working with a trash removal service, there was, in fact, no long-term improvement.

Hoarding was added to the DSM-5 (<http://news.yahoo.com/blogs/lookout/hoarding-disorder-gets-spotlight-dsm-5-165826919.html>) in 2013 as its own disorder, rather than simply a subset of OCD. In an interview with Yahoo News ([Director%2520of%2520the%2520University%2520of%2520California%2520San%2520Diego's%2520Compulsive%2520Disorders%2520Program](http://news.yahoo.com/blogs/lookout/hoarding-disorder-gets-spotlight-dsm-5-165826919.html)) about this new classification, Dr. Sanjaya Saxena,

director of the University of California San Diego's Obsessive-Compulsive Disorders Program (<http://psychiatry.ucsd.edu/specialtyPrograms.html>), said, "The reality shows have raised awareness, but they tend to sensationalize the patients, and they rarely talk about treatment."

I would argue that hoarding reality shows haven't actually raised all that much awareness, for the very same reason I stayed away from "Hoarders" for so long. By focusing on the "most extreme" cases, even though the show tells us in its opening credits that hoarding disorder affects more than 16 million people, it presents hoarding as something almost impossible to understand or relate to. "Hoarding" is showcased as out-there, over-the-top, monstrous. We're meant to feel sorry for the hoarders, perhaps, but not to truly understand what hoarding feels like for them.

Look—I'm not against reality TV; in my view the more gossip, the better. I love "Keeping Up With the Kardashians

(http://www.salon.com/2015/10/05/keeping_up_with_my_kardashian_obsession_why_no_celebrity) I'd even go on a reality show—but not one about being a hoarder. This isn't just a theoretical question for me; several years ago, after coming out as a hoarder

(http://www.salon.com/2011/08/23/i_am_a_hoarder_confessional/) in a Salon essay, I was asked to be on a hoarding reality show (not "Hoarders"). At first, I was excited; not only would I get paid \$3,000, but I'd also receive many thousands of dollars worth of free expert decluttering help.

My inclination was to say yes, both as a way to finally break my hoarding pattern, and publicly hold myself accountable. But when I asked my therapist, friends and loved ones, they almost unanimously told me it was a bad idea. "Is that the way you want to be known to millions of people?" they asked.

I knew exactly why the show wanted me on badly enough to save a spot for me—not only was I a New York apartment dweller instead of a suburban homeowner, but since my job entails writing about sex, they (rightly) assumed that among my treasure trove would be sex toys and other racy items. Given that I had to climb over piles of belongings to get from one room to the next, I certainly didn't know where every last vibrator I'd ever been sent to review had ended up.

I argued that I couldn't really exploit myself if I was the one agreeing to it, and that by being a public face of hoarding, I would be fighting back against the stigma surrounding it. I wanted to do the show to prove that I could laugh at myself and my situation (and even cry a little) while also making a commitment to genuine change. I declined not because of any concern about my reputation, but because I would have had to ask my landlord's permission to film, and was afraid I'd instead be evicted.

Ultimately, though, I'm glad I said no. I've watched enough reality TV to know that rather than having my best interests foremost on their minds, they'd want ratings. They wouldn't have time to expand on the sentiment behind why I've kept every playbill or postcard or book or old piece of clothing, but simply to magnify and amplify all the ways I couldn't keep track of what I owned. I can't say for sure what would have happened if I'd gone on, but especially after watching "Hoarders," I'm glad I declined.

There is indeed a dark side to hoarding, and I fully believe in shining light on our dark sides, on grappling with our deepest flaws in order to overcome them. I'm glad there've been several hoarding memoirs published in recent years, both by hoarders, such as "Lessons in Letting Go" by Corrine Grant and "Mess" by Barry Yourgrau (http://www.salon.com/2015/08/18/my_secret_hoarding_shame_i_lived_with_my_trash_it_was_tim) and books by the children of hoarders, including "Dirty Secret" by Jessie Sholl, "Coming Clean" by Kimberly Rae Miller (http://www.salon.com/2013/07/22/my_father_the_hoarder/) and "White Walls" by Judy Batalion (http://www.salon.com/2011/12/17/hoarding_a_love_story/). All of these take readers deep inside the mind-set of hoarders and those who love them in a way that's far more compassionate than what you'll see on A&E. I do think there's value in exposing the things we feel shame about to the world in order to combat that very shame, I just don't believe reality TV can accomplish that—or at least, that it hasn't yet in the case of hoarding.

I understand why others do find something redeeming about the show; Matt Zoller Seitz called "Hoarders" "sincerely empathetic (http://www.salon.com/2011/01/11/hoarders_2/)" in a review of an episode featuring a rat infestation. He argued, "It depicts extreme behavior, but only as a means of finding a colorful analogue for a psychological process that 'normal' people go through every day: the struggle to identify obsessive and/or self-destructive behavior and then do something about it." While a show like "Hoarders" has the potential to make anyone question their own hoarding tendencies, it does so at the expense of its stars' humanity.

If "Hoarders" organized itself more like "Restaurant: Impossible (<http://www.foodnetwork.com/shows/restaurant-impossible.html>)," where embattled restaurant owners reach out and ask for help from chef Robert Irvine, who comes in and assesses and revamps their entire businesses, I would feel better about it. On "Restaurant: Impossible," we either see their video pleas or else hear directly from them about why they need help. At the very least, then we would know the hoarders are aware of the magnitude of the problem, and we could hear from them in their own words what they think could be done to fix it.

While I'm a layperson, not an expert, I fully believe there are similarities between hoarding and various types of addiction. Therefore, like the 12 Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous (<http://www.alcoholics-anonymous.org.uk/About-AA/The-12-Steps-of-AA>), if a person cannot admit they have a problem, which many of the people on "Hoarders" can't or won't, it seems highly unlikely that any decluttering that happens on the show will have a lasting effect.

I fully believe that, like alcoholism and drug addiction, the only way hoarders will truly have lasting peace and uncluttered lives is if the process starts with them, not if unwanted help is imposed on them from an outside source. If they don't think they have a problem, coming in and throwing away their stuff is but a paltry band-aid on a much larger, deeper problem. Add the fact that it's televised so that this person's entire community, along with the rest of the world, now knows about, but doesn't necessarily understand, their way of thinking, and you simply set them up to fail.

But in the Season 8 episodes so far, most of the subjects either outright resist help, or agree to help but then battle item by item over what should stay and what should go. From the outside, of course, it's easy to cringe or laugh at their reasoning, especially when they say things to the effect of, "I just want to look through those lists I made because there might be something important on them." Even I, who've done the very same thing, wanted to scream at my TV. And that's the point; "Hoarders" sets the viewer up to feel smug and righteous about how much smarter about clutter they are than the poor slobs on-screen.

While "Hoarders" does have trained experts who talk with the hoarders, what it doesn't show is those same experts giving viewers a way to relate to what a hoarder goes through when it comes to parting with their stuff. We may see them cry when faced with their possessions being taken away, but my impression is that we are meant to mock, at worst, and scorn, at best, their suffering. Who would ever want to keep dirty clothes or hundreds of teddy bears? We may see living examples of precisely those people, but what good is that if they're played up to look delusional?

I'm, of course, not the first to point out that "Hoarders" is exploitative. Blogger David Boles (<http://bolesblogs.com/2009/12/23/hoarders-exploiting-the-ugly-and-the-poor/>) did so in 2009, writing: "The uncomfortable fact about watching 'Hoarders' is that it is really a car accident happening in real time over several years — and the hook of the show is to get you to turn your head just a bit to gawk at these misbegotten people as you sprinkle false pity upon them."

Clearly, there's enough of an audience for the show that A&E brought it back on the air this year after canceling it in 2013 (<http://www.avclub.com/article/ae-cancels-hoarders-begrudgingly-throws-old-episod-103355>). I think anyone who's watching from a place other than empathy should ask themselves what they're getting out of the show, and instead of rubbernecking over people who clearly have deeper issues than a 60-minute reality show can solve, figure out what you can do about your own clutter (http://www.salon.com/2010/04/10/am_i_a_hoarder/).

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Rachel Kramer Bussel (<http://www.rachelkramerbussel.com>) is the author of "Sex & Cupcakes: A Juicy Collection of Essays" and the editor of more than 50 anthologies, including "The Big Book of Orgasms," "Serving Him" and "Irresistible: Erotic Romance for Couples." She writes widely about sex,

dating and pop culture, and is a blogger at Lusty Lady (<http://lustylady.blogspot.com>) and Cupcakes Take the Cake. (<http://cupcakestakethecake.blogspot.com>)

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