

My concern 'Surjury' could become 2020's version of the Jeremy Kyle Show

A jury of “peers and experts” will discuss whether members of a group of young people deserve to have plastic surgery or not.



The Jeremy Kyle show has been taken off the air after the death of guest Steve Dymond, right (Image: ITV)

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The news that TV host Jeremy Kyle will bank a reported sum of more than £500,000 after winding down one of his media companies will possibly soften the impact of an eventful few months for him.

In May, Kyle's long-running, successful daytime reality show was discontinued after it came to light that one of its recent participants, Steve Dymond, was found dead following a recording of the ITV show during which he took and failed a lie detector test.

Condemnations of the show, which typically involved members of the public airing their problems and private lives in front of a studio audience, were swift and from the highest places.

The BBC reported that Downing Street had called the death "deeply concerning" with a former president of the Royal College of Psychiatrists saying that the show overall was "the theatre of cruelty...it might entertain a million people a day, but then again, so did Christians versus lions".

In June, the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Select Committee launched a formal enquiry into the show (and reality programmes as a whole) where ITV executives were summoned to Parliament to give evidence about the after-care and mental health support it offered to participants.

Members of the committee (as is often the case in such enquiries held in Parliament) were direct in their criticism of the show. Paul Farrelly MP said it was "trash TV" and that the show's makers "should be ashamed of themselves".

Cardiff Central MP Jo Stevens said the show had a duty of care and that if producers didn't know how accurate the lie detectors were, then the "entire premise of the show is fake".

The show's producers (it must be noted that Kyle himself refused to appear) were visibly uncomfortable but fought back. ITV's managing director Julian Bellamy said 20,000 guests had appeared in 3,000 episodes and only seven had complained to Ofcom, the UK's communication regulator. Not one complaint had been upheld, he said.

But in many ways, it's surprising that the show made it to 14 years such is the criticism it faced. To its detractors it was lowest common denominator television, pitting the most vulnerable members of society against each other in front of a baying, whooping crowd. At its centre was Kyle - the ringmaster ramping up the tension, stalking the stage and not so much claiming the moral high ground as invading it and shutting out any other aspiring occupants.

To its defenders, there was clearly an audience for this brand of TV and it was showing working-class life as it really was. What about the agency of the guests? No one

was forcing people to appear, and many had received the advice or resolution they required.

For as many previous guests who complained about poor treatment and after-care, there were those who praised Kyle and his team for their thoughtfulness and efficiency.

Reality TV star White Dee, who shot to fame as part of Channel 4's *Benefit Street*, appeared on the show in February and said she was pleased with the after-care she received, thanking producers for following up her experience. She also singled out Kyle for treating her with respect.

But as Amol Rajan, the BBC's media editor has asked: The question prompted by Mr Dymond's death is whether the very genre of which Jeremy Kyle is the personification has any place on our screens?

Almost 11 years ago award-winning journalist Carole Cadwalladr wrote a critique of the show and its practices, and attended a show and tracked down some of the participants.

Of the show's guests in general, she wrote: "All human life is here: cheating husbands, delinquent children, tearaway teens, feckless fathers, the long-term unemployed, the clinically depressed, wife-beaters, husband-beaters, child-beaters, victims of abuse, perpetrators of abuse, alcoholics, junkies, the sexually insecure, the sexually confused, the sexually polymorphous."

Phillip Hodson, a spokesman for the British Association of Counselling and Psychotherapy told Cadwalladr: "It's extraordinary in the modern world where we're so sensitive to hate crimes of all kinds that we still find the mentally ill, or the mentally challenged, a fit subject for amusement. It isn't funny."

In this sense, the popularity of the Kyle show becomes a problem for society, a problem for us all. The real reason why it lasted for 14 years is because it attracted audiences, which attracted advertisers. The bottom line is that it was economically viable to parade less fortunate members of society before audiences eager to measure the quality of their own lives against those of the guests.

Which brings to mind Channel 4's latest venture into reality television - *Surjury*. The show, due to air in January, will have a jury of "peers and experts" deliberating about whether members of a group of young people deserve to have plastic surgery or not.

Gerard Lambe, a prominent cosmetic and plastic surgeon told talkRADIO's Matthew Wright the show was despicable - but that there was public appetite for it: "Until we change our minds and decide that this is not the sort of thing we want to be viewing and not the sort of standards that we want to be setting then it will carry on - that is rather depressing I'm afraid."

But in what seems like a statement absolving the show of any responsibility at all whilst enhancing its public service element, Ross McCarthy, executive producer for its creators, Gobstopper Television, said: "This is a totally new way of doing peer-to-peer advice. Our pitchers will either get the surgery they've always wanted, or a massive boost in confidence when the public rules they don't need work at all!"

What could possibly go wrong?

ALSO BY JOHN:

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