

A new Netflix show wants to manipulate people into committing murder

Reality shows, on the whole, have never been particularly ethical endeavors. From beauty pageants where women got plastic surgery makeovers to substance abuse intervention shows that allowed participants to drive under the influence of drugs and alcohol, their interest has always been less in exploring the human condition and more in producing the most outlandish, desperate, and provocative behavior possible for the entertainment of the audience.

But Netflix is poised to take this shameless impulse to the next level with *The Push*, a reality show designed to manipulate people into committing murder.

[embedded content]

Yes, you read that correctly. The very best thing I can say about this show is that no one commits “real” murder, and that we haven’t reached *The Running Man* levels of depravity... yet. But with the help of Derren Brown, who bills himself as a “psychological illusionist,” *The Push* plunges a seemingly unaware contestant into an elaborately constructed scenario involving 70 actors – one devised specifically to encourage him to push an old man off a building.

“I need him to feel like there’s only one way out when he’s told to commit murder,” says Brown in the trailer.

That’s an interesting use of the word “need,” since I’m not sure that anyone actually “needs” to see a real person pushed

to the most debased extremes. The show audaciously claims that this is some sort of valuable sociological experiment, one designed to explore whether or not human beings are willing to commit terrible acts when they are told that they have no other choice.

“The question we’re asking is simple,” says Brown in the trailer. “Can we be manipulated through social pressure to commit murder?”

The answer is yes. I say this not because I have any special knowledge of the show, but because I am reasonably aware of the history of psychology, which answered this question more than 50 years ago. In the 1960s, Yale University psychologist Stanley Milgram recruited male participants from a variety of backgrounds, and had an authority figure instruct them to administer escalating electrical shocks to an unseen person – an actor – as the person screamed in pain and begged to be released. Two-thirds of the participants were willing to administer a potential fatal dose of electricity to the victim, because a man in a white lab coat insisted that they were “required” to do so.

[embedded content]

The Milgram experiment is widely considered one of the most unethical psychological experiments in modern history, and one that demonstrates exactly what Brown claims the show will “expose”: that many human beings – or at least some American males, per his sample demographic – are indeed very vulnerable to committing terrible acts when commanded to do so by authority figures.

Milgram himself was inspired by the behavior of average Germans during the Nazi regime and the war crimes trial of Holocaust organizer Adolf Eichmann, and the questions they raised about the willingness of “ordinary” people to commit horrific crimes. In his 1974 book *Obedience to Authority*,

Milgram wrote that he observed an “extreme willingness of adults to go to almost any lengths on the command of an authority... Ordinary people, simply doing their jobs, and without any particular hostility on their part, can become agents in a terrible destructive process.”

Some psychologists have criticized Milgram’s experiment, and his lack of emphasis on the minority that refuses to kill, or the strategies people can develop for saying no. But regardless, his results should not come as an enormous surprise to anyone who has studied history, which is full of countless examples of war, murder, and genocide being perpetrated not just by sociopaths, but by “normal” citizens. The idea that people can do horrific things when coerced to do so by an authority figure – or an elaborately constructed psychological scenario – is not a revelation in the year 2018; it’s a thinly veiled excuse for watching a man get traumatized into committing “murder” on television for entertainment, not to mention the plot of the 1997 movie *The Game*.

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Reality TV has a long history of subjecting its participants to horrifying experiences, from *Solitary*, where contestants lived in windowless, 10-foot-wide rooms while being deprived of sleep and tormented by a malevolent “AI,” to *Susunu! Denpa Shōnen*, a Japanese reality show where a man sat naked and alone in an apartment for fifteen months, living off only the goods he could win from sweepstakes.

The very best thing we can say about *those* shows is that at least people knew (mostly) what they were signing up for – although offering people large sums of money for what amounts to psychological torture is pretty horrifying even (or especially) when people are getting paid for it.

Conversely, there’s a whole subgenre of reality shows devoted

to making fools of people under false premises, including *Space Cadets*, which convinced people that they had been blasted into space as astronauts while sitting in a “shuttle” on the ground, *I Wanna Marry Harry*, where American women competed for the love of what turned out to be a Prince Harry lookalike, and *Superstar USA*, which billed itself as an *America Idol*-style competition seeking the best singer – when it was really looking for the very worst. These hoaxes run the gamut between good-natured pranks and instruments of incredible cruelty, but none hold a candle to *The Push*, which again, is a show about manipulating human beings into murdering each other.

It’s also worth noting that while Milgram’s experiment relied purely on the participants’ obedience to authority to produce murderous behavior, *The Push* appears to go several steps further, by convincing its subject / victim that he will go to prison if he does not kill. “He’s a millionaire, he’s going to make sure you go to jail!” says one actor, urging the “contestant” to give the rich man who can supposedly ruin his life “one big push” off a building.

“Can social compliance be used to make someone push a living breathing human being to their death?” asks Brown, as furious string music rises behind him. Yeah, probably! Except that falsely telling someone to kill or go to prison goes well beyond a matter of social compliance to actively threatening and coercing them, not that this matters to Brown and company. In the end, we will learn nothing from the show except how terrible human beings can be – not just because we might push someone off a building to save ourselves, but because we are still so willing to force each other into these modern-day gladiator arenas, and watch each other suffer so that we might be entertained.

<https://www.theverge.com/2018/2/20/17032706/netflix-push-derren-brown-milgram-murder>